



Testimony – Steve Coenen

When I saw the images of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath on the Gulf Coast that ran endlessly on the news channels in 2005, my reaction was shock and dismay, not only at the magnitude of the storm and the extreme flooding, but the live images of human suffering and death left in its wake. It was amazing to me that Wal Mart and helpful celebrities were actually more effective at getting food, water and aid to the suffering than our own government. I did not feel an immediate call to action, as I had other volunteer activities taking up time in my life.

As time passed, more information indicated that the people who were poorest and most vulnerable were getting the least amount of aid. While casinos and condos were rebuilt, along with the lightly damaged French Quarter, over 10,000 homeless huddle in camps under bridges and other places in New Orleans. Worse yet, we learned in December 2007 that FEMA planned to close all of the trailer parks in Louisiana within six months. In spite of this, the New Orleans City Council voted five days before Christmas to demolish more than 4500 apartments in the city's largest public housing development, with no affordable replacements to be made available and more expensive housing planned in a couple of years.

I realized that the best way to fight the injustices facing the current and relocated citizens of New Orleans is direct action. When women were fighting for the right to vote in the United States, they did not wait for government officials to take action, they took direct action on the streets. When Martin Luther King and many other citizens saw the inequities of discrimination and repressive Jim Crow laws, they acted in accord with their beliefs and took action to change the course of history. I am honored to have participated in living the UU principle of creating a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, by helping to rebuild New Orleans with 25 other people of all ages from Emerson Chapel.

The gratitude and pride of place that we saw from so many New Orleans citizens was inspiring, as it reminded us that all of our rebuilding, painting, and landscaping work was appreciated, however minor we might think our sweat equity was during our short week in the Crescent city. As Mother Theresa once said, what we do may be a drop in the ocean, but the ocean would be less for that drop.

I met a woman named Ruby, who worked at the Bed and Breakfast that I stayed in the last two nights of my trip, after the housing situation at the First UU church fell apart. The owner, Dennis Hilton, said that Ruby had lived and worked at the Bed and Breakfast for two years, because she had lost her house in the hurricane. He said he had taken her to her house after the storm waters subsided, and she went in to the wet and broken house to see what she could recover. Fifteen minutes later, she came out of the house carrying a vase-she said her mother had given her the vase a long time ago. The vase had survived



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the storm, and was about the only thing she was able to recover. She is hopeful to eventually find a new house to live in.

While I do not have time to tell all the stories of what I experienced here this morning, I can say that Ruby's story reminds us that the rebuilding that is being done in New Orleans is doing more than putting up buildings or putting plants in the ground. It is helping to build and sustain hope in the souls of those who are fighting to rebuild their lives and bring back the unique and vibrant spirit of New Orleans. As Martin Luther King once said, We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope. Our work in New Orleans helps to keep alive that tiny flame of hope that burns brightly in those who want their city back again.

I challenge everyone here to go to New Orleans, either again or the first time, and fight to give New Orleans back to its citizens by helping to rebuild. I can guarantee that you will get back more than you give. Namaste, Shalom, and Blessed Be.

#### Testimony – The Jonas Family

When the New Orleans challenge was presented to us last year, my family rushed over to sign up without hesitation. No one had to explain how important this was or how much good it would be for us to go there and work together. Emily remembered hearing about Katrina on the news. My mom had always wanted to participate in projects like this, but until now, we had always been too young to go with her. I had not realized that New Orleans was as bad as it was, but I have always liked doing service projects with my friends in youth group.

Getting ready to leave was insane. I was about to miss a lot of school at a time when everyday counts. Emily was still recovering from pneumonia, but begged my mom to let her go. She knew that if she didn't at least try, she would regret it later. We all agreed this trip was an important part of a balanced education, worth coming home to a huge pile of make-up work.

The first day there was very sad, because the three of us toured the 9<sup>th</sup> ward on our own, and did a lot of talking about the situation down there. Learning the history of what happened was an important thing for us to do, because the news did little to educate us about the experience of the people in New Orleans or prepare us for what we would see. The tragedy seems to be much more complicated than the fact that there was a terrible flood.

We all agreed that the best part of the trip was talking with the people that we were helping and seeing the reactions on their faces after a job well done. It was great to work with friends from Emerson. Who knew that shoveling dirt all day could be fun, but it was when 11 of us did it together! We met amazing people, people who have suffered so much themselves, and yet still continue to



strive to give to others in need. By helping them, we enabled them to help many others.

My family rarely has the opportunity to take vacations, so I'm glad that we relaxed on one of our days and acted silly as we rode streetcars and took in the sights, sounds, and foods of the French Quarter. We bought t-shirts, Mardi Gras masks, and street signs.

One of the most critical things we learned on this trip was that the locals consider the flood to be a "man-made disaster" and are very angry with government. They provided us with clear, emotional answers to common judgmental questions such as, "Why didn't they just leave?" and "Why would they want to go back?"

The racism in New Orleans is undeniable. Emily was harassed on a streetcar by a man who thought it was wrong to rebuild the parts of town (that were predominantly African-American) saying that they don't take care of their homes anyway. Well that was not the experience we had in the homes where we worked. It was actually quite the opposite. Emily defended herself and the work we were doing like a true Unitarian, until my mom made her stop talking to this man for safety reasons.

One of the most important things we brought back with us are the stories and accounts we heard. We are spreading the word to anyone who will listen. I didn't realize that people still don't have their insurance money, after all this time. My mom learned that some of the people living in tents under the highway go to work everyday to pay a mortgage on a home that doesn't exist. We also brought back a CD called "Songs of Hope" that was a gift from Reverend Josephine. Emily listens to it quite a bit.

This trip follows the principle that every person has inherent worth and dignity. We were there to help people regardless of their religion. No one has to believe what we believe in order to deserve our help. It also follows the principle to respect the interdependent web of all existence. One of our jobs was to help restore the wetlands. While this may seem less necessary than rebuilding homes, it recognizes that the storm and flood hurt more than just people, but also animal-life and plant-life essential to the New Orleans ecological balance.

We have all changed because of this trip. I understand how easy it is to forget about a disaster after it stops appearing on the news. But the need for relief is not over, and won't be over for a long time. My mom has been humbled by the appreciation for our work and the hopes and dreams of the New Orleans people. Emily has realized how lucky she is and appreciates her life so much more. She hopes that sharing her photos with touching and meaningful explanations will change at least one person's point of view.



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Message:

**There are four kinds of social action. The one most people are familiar with is charity.** When millions of dollars were given by individuals after Hurricane Katrina, most of that was charity. Charity fills an immediate need and is absolutely necessary, but it does nothing to change the situation that caused the need in the first place.

That's what the other three forms of social action are about.

**Education** as social action is about raising our awareness that we are part of an interdependent web. Suffering anywhere is suffering everywhere, and we are truly responsible for one another. Education as social action is about exploring and understanding our connections so that we become open to the world around us and, hopefully, more prepared to actively live in a way that best supports the wellbeing of the planet and all that inhabits it. Education as social action is an integral part of our religious education program and has been a strong focus of Unitarianism and Universalism since their birth.

**Witnessing** is another form of social action. Witnessing is when you take the truth as you know it, and proclaim it to the world. In the last election cycle many of you put bumper stickers urging voters to support proposition 2 which expanded stem cell research in the state of Missouri. That's witnessing. When our youth group stood before Planned Parenthood on the anniversary of Roe vs. Wade, they witnessed for reproductive justice. When churches hang rainbow flags in front of their buildings, they witness their support for gay rights and equal marriage. Witnessing is publicly proclaiming what you believe in the hopes changing minds and thus effecting change.

**Both education and witnessing, when done at their best, become tools for the final form of social action, which is transformative justice.** This is when you seek to change the systems that created the injustice in the first place. You are looking for lasting, transformative, liberating change. The civil rights movement, the peace movement, environmentalism, the labor movement, and the women's movement were and are profoundly about transforming society. This kind of change takes a long time and a lot of commitment. Charity brings immediate relief, which is why it can, in the short term, feel so satisfying. But transformative justice happens slowly because life is complex and most of us, in some way, are wedded to the way things are. Being committed to transformative justice means changing not just society out there, but yourself in here, and that is indeed something that takes time and persistence. You are in for the long haul when you commit to working for transformative justice.

When we went to New Orleans, we entered a program that took us on a journey. We were educated over the course of two days about the community into which we entered. We learned about the intersection of race and class and how it influenced the unfolding of the tragedy. We learned about pre-Katrina pleas for funds to maintain the levees, funds that were never delivered, funds that might have prevented the tragedy in the first place. We learned about programs intended to help all that helped only those with means. We learned about New Orleans culture and history so that we could truly appreciate where we were, what had been lost, and why it was so important to rebuild. It was not an easy education. As our awareness was raised, many of us experienced feelings of anger, helplessness, impatience, and deep sadness. But, we also gained a sense of purpose and solidarity. We knew who we were there for, and we knew how



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important it was that we had come, and we knew that it was a good thing that we stood there together, ready to work.

Our work sites were carefully chosen with an eye to transformative justice. So while it might have felt like charity to spend a day installing cabinets, planting a garden, or raking dirt, there was always an eye to the bigger picture. Some of the individuals who we helped were key activists in the community, working to undo institutionalized classism and racism that has privileged the wealthy over the poor, and land developers over families and individuals. Helping these people rebuild their lives would help the whole community for they were strands in the fabric of a movement that is working to change the system.

It was the same with the organizations we were sent to. Schools, especially in the poor areas, are very slow in rebuilding. We know how important education is to give our kids have a chance in life. So we were sent to schools. We helped renovate a community center that provides transitional housing, for many cannot afford to rent temporary housing and rebuild. Our volunteer service was intended to empower those we served to do the important transformative work that needs to be done. This is social action for the long haul.

What we learned is that there are powerful forces at work in the city of New Orleans, the state of Louisiana, and Washington D.C., that are diligently working to dispossess people of their homes so that developers have access to land they have wanted for a long time. The flood provided an opportunity to displace a significant majority of the population, mostly poor and black, and get that land.

But no one expected the thousands of volunteers who have streamed into New Orleans to rebuild homes and communities. They began coming as soon as the waters receded, and they haven't stopped. As it became clear that government at all levels has been unwilling to engage any kind of sustained comprehensive recovery, volunteers from the United States, Canada, and around the world have come to help. While volunteer work has not stopped the land grab, it has made a serious dent. Every volunteer helps more people return to the city and rebuild their homes and their lives. Perhaps this is why we were always thanked profusely when people learned why we were there. Over and over we heard, "Thank God for the volunteers. Without you, our city could not recover."

Our work was part of a sustained attempt to bring transformative justice to bear on New Orleans. And in doing that, something else has happened. We became witnesses. How many New Orleanians we met asked us to please go home and tell everyone we met the story about what is happening in their city. The media has moved on. The American public moved on. The politicians are trying to move on, but it's volunteers coming home and witnessing to their friends and loved ones, and to their elected representatives, that are keeping the Gulf Coast on their radar. Week after week, month after month, volunteers continue to stream into the city, and they leave changed by the experience, and they are witnessing to what has and is happening in the Crescent City. Our service this morning is an act of witnessing. It is about telling this beloved religious community what we have seen, what we have learned, and how we have been changed. But most importantly, it's about the asking the question, what now? Given our values, given our religious commitment to affirm and promote justice for all, what are we called to do?



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First, I would hope that those of you with voting rights make sure to let your elected representatives know that they are being watched and evaluated for their actions regarding New Orleans.

Secondly, I hope and pray that our trip to New Orleans is not a blip in our history. Whether we return to New Orleans, or choose a social justice ministry closer to home, for believe you me some of the same things are happening here, often cloaked in words like "eminent domain," I hope the energy that we raised for this service trip will not fizzle away and it's up to each of you to make sure that does not happen. I can't make it happen, one lay leader can't make it happen, it has to be all of us. What are we called to do as liberal religious people so that we don't become like one more sleepy suburban church focused more on our own needs than on reaching out to others. We need this for ourselves as badly as others need our time and our money and our compassion.

One of the board goals this year is to take the energy that we raised for our trip to New Orleans and channel it into a permanent social justice ministry at Emerson Chapel. So this is my challenge to you. Where is your passion? What do you care about deeply? And what are you willing to do about it?

I invite you to this most holy of conversations.

Amen and blessed be.