

The City That Care Forgot: Why We Need New Orleans

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Wildflower Church, Austin, Texas

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Prelude

I've Never Been To New Orleans

(Patterson Barrett)

Riding cross Lake Ponchartrain, driving down from Baton Rouge
I can see it all there in my brain (man, that thing is really huge)
Though I've never been there, in my mind
I'm standing in that second line

I've never been to New Orleans but I think I might like to go
Down to the land of rice and beans and have a big ol' bowl of filet gumbo

Lunch with a po'boy at napoleon's
Be gone by night, that's when the tourists come
Speaking french with a southern drawl
Bon temps roulez, c'est la vie, you all
When I'm there make groceries Sunday
Soak the beans do laundry Monday

With the changing light we'll cross the neutral ground
Now we're headed for a different part of town

My spy boy got lots of good gris-gris
So if you want to stay safe stick close to me
Though I've never been there, in my mind
I'm standin' in that second line, singing "Iko, Iko ...

When the ice cap melts they'll be the first to go
They're already lower than the sea, you know
So build that levee, got to build it high so New Orleans might never die
Standin' in that second line, singing "Fiyo on the Bayou...

Now won't you take me down there when I die
'Cause they really know how to say good-bye
There'll be singing, dancing, music played
Why, they even give you your own parade
But if they bury you it won't be deep
So you won't get seasick while you sleep

Well I've never been to New Orleans but I'd really like to go
Down to the land of the carnival queen, Little Richard and Fats Domino

Bon Ton Rouler

Laissez les bon ton rouler! That's Francais for, "Let the good times roll!" It's one of the mottoes of New Orleans, the Big Easy, the City that Care Forgot.

When it comes to weird, a burg like Austin is just a Bubba-come-lately. For close to three hundred years, New Orleans has been the crazy aunt in America's attic. The rest of the country's always had mixed feelings about its Creole kin, much like its attitudes towards Sin in general. They'll denounce it as Babylon on the bayou, and then book a long weekend to indulge in its guilty pleasures – like the Rev. Jimmy Swaggart, who fell from grace at a motel on Airline Highway. Yes, New Orleans has been the place where America's Id goes to play.

Love the Big Easy or loathe her, few ever stop to ask how she got that way. Any athlete or musician can tell you that ease is a well-crafted illusion. It takes years of hard work to make something look easy. For New Orleans, it's been centuries of hard times that have fueled the craving for good times. There's a reason why her patron saint is St. Jude, the saint of lost causes and desperate situations.

Other cities have rebuilt themselves from the ashes: Atlanta, Chicago, San Francisco. But none has done it so many times as New Orleans.

Her first catastrophe came in 1788, when fire destroyed most of the original French settlement. The Spanish had barely rebuilt, six years later, when three hurricanes and another fire consumed what was left. Thus, the oldest buildings in the French Quarter date from 1795, and they're Spanish.

Once it turned American, New Orleans became the nation's fastest-growing city. Between the Louisiana Purchase and the Civil War, its population exploded from 8,000 to nearly 170,000.

But behind those numbers were years of tragedy, thanks to the mosquitoes that infested its stagnant swamps. Yellow fever claimed at least 41,000 lives. Smallpox and cholera claimed more. In 1853, one of every 20 residents died of disease.

The survivors? They learned to eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow they might die. In a sort of spiritual alchemy, they transformed grief into celebration, funerals into parades and cemeteries into tourist traps. The city of too much care put on a mask and became The City That Care Forgot. Where death was a constant companion, life had to be a carnival.

Mardi Gras Mambo

(K. Elliott, L. Welch, F. Adams)

Down in New Orleans
Where the blues was born
It takes a cool cat
To blow a horn
On LaSalle and Rampart Street
The combos play with a mambo beat

They play the Mardi Gras, mambo, mambo, mambo
Mardi Gras, mambo, mambo, mambo

Mardi Gras, mambo
Down in New Orleans

In Gert Town
Where the cats all meet
They play the Mardi Gras mambo
With a beat
Jolly Chief and the Zulu king
Truck on down
Where the mambos swing

Do the Mardi Gras, mambo, mambo, mambo
Mardi Gras, mambo, mambo, mambo
Mardi Gras, mambo
Down in New Orleans

Mardi Gras

One of the high points of my years in New Orleans was Mardi Gras, 1990. That was the year I rode a float in the Zulu parade. I spent \$400 for my spot on the float and an equal amount on cups, spears and panties to toss to the crowd, all for the chance to put on blackface and a grass skirt and be assaulted by thousands of total strangers for six hours.

To a casual tourist, Mardi Gras is the world's largest fraternity party. To a native of New Orleans, it's a religion.

For a good thousand years, Carnival was an underground festival of the Catholic Church. It wasn't an official holiday until 1582. But church fathers learned to look the other way. Before the self-sacrifice of Lent, they granted the faithful an outlet to indulge the seven deadly sins.

They recognized that part of staying sane is the freedom to go crazy once in awhile. In our everyday roles, we all wear masks. Those masks are easier to accept when we have an occasional chance to don a different mask and play a different character.

Today, Mardi Gras remains a medieval mystery play. It pantomimes the world of feudalism, in which lords and ladies toss trinkets to the peasants. It's also a subtle rebellion against that world. Any commoner can become king for a day. While Carnival affirms the walls that divide, it also fortifies the ties that bind: class to class and race to race.

Since March 3, 1699, when French explorers marked the first Mardi Gras in the New World, the holiday has felt the stamp of French, Anglos, Spanish, Africans, Irish and Italians. No culture is more colorful than that of the Mardi Gras Indians.

Mardi Gras Indians are African-American dancers. They dress up in elaborate costumes that are equal parts feathers and sequins, Sitting Bull and Elvis. They were first recorded back in 1746, when native Chickasaws were helping slaves escape to the swamps. Today, a handmade costume can run \$57,000. The tribes confront each other with elaborate choreography, with characters like Big Chief, Spy Boy and Flag Boy.

They have distinctive songs, as well. In 1965, those songs burst onto American radio when the Dixie Cups recorded "Iko Iko." The name "Jockamo" means Jester. "Jockamo fee na nay," in the original French, means, "Won't play the fool no more."

Iko Iko

(James "Sugar Boy" Crawford)

My flag boy and your flag boy
Sittin' by the bayou.
My flag boy tell your flag boy,
"Gonna set your flag on fire"

Talkin' bout
Hey now (hey now)
Hey now (hey now)
Iko iko un day
Jockomo feeno ah na nay
Jockomo fee na nay

Look at my king all dressed in red
Iko, Iko, unday.
I betcha five dollars he'll kill you dead
Jockomo fee na nay

Look at my king all dressed in green
Iko Iko unday
He ain't a man, he's a lovin' machine.
Jockomo fee na nay

My spy boy and your spy boy
Sitting by the bayou
My spy boy tell your spy boy,
"Gonna set your tail on fire."

Location, Location, Location

It was water that created New Orleans. It was water that almost destroyed it. And sooner or later, water may finish the job. The water giveth, and the water taketh away.

The reason New Orleans exists at all is because of location, location, location. In 1718, the site of the Big Easy was the easiest link between the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico. Below New Orleans, the 90 miles of river were shallow and silty, an ever-shifting obstacle course for ships to run aground.

But at New Orleans, there was a shortcut. The Choctaw Indians found it first. Riverboats could drop their cargo onto a natural levee, where the river dumped its load of mud onto a lazy curve. A two-mile portage reached Bayou St. John, which led to Lake Pontchartrain, which emptied into the Gulf. That was good enough reason for Jean Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville, to lay out the streets of the Vieux Carre, the French Quarter.

That's also why the Quarter didn't flood during Hurricane Katrina. It's one of the few spots in town that's actually above sea level.

Today, there's no better place to see the river than the Moonwalk, a boardwalk that connects the river to Jackson Square. It's named after Moon Landrieu, who was mayor from 1970 to 1978. It's where I was sitting one morning in 1991, a week before I moved to Texas. I was having my last cup of café au lait and my last bag of beignets, those addictive square doughnuts drenched in powdered sugar. I leaned back and watched, one last time, as the human parade mingled with the memories.

New Orleans

(Steve Brooks)

Myrtles in bloom,
Morning in June,
Whole world smells like a cup of coffee.
French Quarter scene,
Moves like a dream,
Better let 'em dream along without me,
'Cause I'm bound to leave New Orleans,
Taking one last look along the river.
Hardly can believe, New Orleans,
After all this time we been together.

I was a kid,
Hitting the skids.
You gave me something to believe in,
Threw me a line,
Taught me to rhyme -
Those rhymes that never need a reason.
Now you're like an old pair of jeans,
Still remember when you used to fit me.
Coffee's getting cold, New Orleans,
In between the sugar and the chickory.

Now the years, like lover's tears, come wash over me,
Riding back the streetcar track of my memory.
And I know what it means to miss New Orleans.

I'd like to delay,
But I'm on my way,
Like water, looking for its level.
Want you to know,
Wherever I go,
Gonna take you with me when I travel,
'Cause you're in my soul, New Orleans,
You're the flower pressed between my pages
Let the good times roll, New Orleans,
Like the river, rolling down the ages.

Goodbye, goodbye, New Orleans
And hello, hello to my dreams.

Why We Need New Orleans

From 1930 to 1985, New Orleans was home to the United Fruit Company, the parent of Chiquita bananas. Locals joked that the city was the world's northernmost banana republic. Today, when TV cameras come to New Orleans, that's what they show us: a charity case straight out of the Third World. Two years after Hurricane Katrina, America's ambivalence is still on display, as we dither between sending aid and expecting survivors to pull themselves from the wreckage. Either way, the message we get is that New Orleans is a needy place. New Orleans needs us.

To me, it all sounds a little codependent. A healthy relationship is a two-way street, especially if it's wide enough for a parade, and to my mind, we need New Orleans just as much as she needs us. So I'm not going to focus on what we should give to New Orleans. I want to talk about what we can get from New Orleans. I want to suggest five lessons that we might glean from her three hundred years of experience.

In part, they're spiritual lessons, because New Orleans might be the most spiritual city in the United States. So I want to talk in terms of souls, the soul of America, and the soul of New Orleans, dark as a blackwater swamp, rich as a bowl of seafood gumbo.

When I moved there in 1985, I met the dark side of New Orleans right away. It was anything but easy. Within two months, I had my car stolen, wrecked a rent-a-car and erupted in a tropical skin disease.

But even as I struggled to plant my feet, I had enchanted moments: two-stepping at the Maple Leaf Bar, riding the St. Charles streetcar Uptown on an oak-dappled morning, taking in the greatest free show on earth that is the French Quarter at any hour of the day or night.

But the night I really got New Orleans happened at Franky and Johnny's, a neighborhood dive next to the docks. I was sitting there, munching on a po-boy, when a man in a pirate's costume burst through the front door. For no apparent reason, he was carrying a watermelon. But the regulars knew the drill. Within seconds, we were dancing behind him in a conga line. The crowd snaked its way out to the street, where Jack the Tutu Man cleft the melon with a mighty blow from the samurai sword that dangled from his belt. As I shared in the spoils of the watermelon sacrifice, my belly was filled, and my eyes were opened.

New Orleans wasn't just another American city. It was an alternate American dream. Not the Horatio Alger dream of upward mobility and economic efficiency. No, New Orleans was more like a real dream, full of fantastic images and poetic leaps of logic, welling up from the depths of America's unconscious.

It was a dream in which Uptown mansions rose a block away from shotgun slums, and shotgun slums were gussied up with gingerbread, in which the smell of spice mingled with the smell of vomit along Bourbon Street at daybreak, in which America's greatest art form, jazz, was born in the parlors of Storyville bordellos.

Even directions were topsy-turvy. The reference point was not the compass, but the river, which warped the fabric of space as it curled around the city. Instead of East,

West, North and South, you had Uptown, Downtown, Lakeside and Riverside. When you stood on the East Bank of the river, you watched the sun come up over the West Bank.

If space was distorted, so was the sense of time. Like the river, it did not move in straight lines. It swirled you around in its eddies. The Middle Ages lived on, right next to the Jazz Age and the Space Age. Progress was a phantom, because you never knew when the next disaster would wash it all away.

If you came from a city that ran on the clock, New Orleans would appall you. Wave upon wave of reformers have planted their flags, dismayed by its poverty, sloth and corruption, convinced that it needed to change. Sooner or later, they grudgingly conceded that most folks in New Orleans loved things just the way they were.

Politicians would always be crooked, but unlike other cities, at least they were honest about it. Money was scarce, but you didn't need a lot to get by. Housing was cheap. World-class cuisine was just around the corner, and world-class music came marching past your front door. As one resident told the New York Times, "I was born poor; I'm probably going to die poor; and before the storm came through I was doing pretty good."

Who needs a pile of cash when you have culture? And not a secondhand sophistication imported from New York or Paris or Hollywood. Locals created their own culture on their own terms. And the arts that grew like moss in the streets and kitchens and warehouses of New Orleans went on to change New York and Paris and Hollywood.

That's the first lesson from the Crescent City: If you don't have a place in the mainstream culture, make up your own. It's the entrepreneurial spirit that gave us jazz, blues and rock'n'roll, the same spirit that now gives us bloggers and You-Tubers on the Internet.

New Orleans has been making it up ever since King Louis first staked out the city and promptly forgot about it. Years would go by without a ship from the mother country. Cut off from home, Frenchmen, Spaniards and Africans fashioned their own language, their own cuisine, their own music, even their own religions. After 1803, they absorbed Anglos, Italian and Irish – even the dreaded Yankees – without losing their roots. Newcomers stirred in new flavors to the roux.

That's a second lesson from New Orleans. New Orleans was multicultural before multicultural was cool. Like the concept of God, the concept of America is much bigger than many Americans give it credit for. We are not a melting pot, where races and cultures merge into a single identity with a single language. We're a gumbo pot, where the ingredients maintain distinct tastes and textures while combining into a savory whole.

Take the polyglot dialect known as Yat, from the salutation, "Where y'at, dawlin'?" The accent sounds a lot like Brooklyn or Jersey, thanks to the same stocks of Irish and Italian immigrants, but many of the phrases and idioms come from France, Spain and West Africa. Shopping, for example, becomes "making groceries" – a literal translation of the French verb *faire*. The word "gumbo" itself comes from an African word for okra.

Or take the city's history of race relations. Before the Civil War, New Orleans counted more free blacks than any other city in America, making up 45 percent of the black population. It was also the only Southern city that allowed slaves to congregate in public. They had Sundays off, and gathered in Congo Square, just outside the French

Quarter, for music, dance and markets. Other dancers gathered along Bayou St. John for voodoo services, which attracted the curious of all races.

The dancers were ancestors of another New Orleans tradition – the Second Line. Any parade or procession has a First Line – a band or some floats who lead the line of marchers. Behind the First Line, any spectator is invited to fall into a Second Line, dancing, high-stepping and pumping umbrellas down the street. Carnival works in much the same way. The crowd in its costumes, shouting “Throw me something, Mister,” is as much a piece of the spectacle as the floats and the riders.

That’s a third lesson from New Orleans: Tearing down the wall between spectator and performer. The audience doesn’t sit passively and enjoy the show. Everyone’s encouraged to express their own creativity. Just as anyone can be an aristocrat, if only for a day, so anyone can be a star.

All these celebrations and festivals suggest a fourth lesson of New Orleans: The importance of ritual in gluing a community together, by imprinting its identity, by bringing citizens out of their living rooms and into the streets. Most American cities look to sports to fill that need. In New Orleans, the ritual is religious, and lasts not just the night of a championship game, but a month or more.

Ritual is the core of Catholic cultures, and the soul of New Orleans is Catholic. If you’re born there, you know you’ll eat red beans and rice every Monday, spaghetti every Wednesday and fish every Friday, for the rest of your life. You’ll have a forgiving attitude towards the seven deadly sins - in particular, sloth, lust and gluttony – because, praise the Lord, you can always atone. Party hardy on Fat Tuesday, and in the morning, you can wear ashes.

Perhaps the most profound of New Orleans rituals is the jazz funeral. It began around the turn of the last century, as jazz itself was being born, to honor musicians who had passed away. The ceremony falls into two parts. The first is a procession to the cemetery. Known as the “dirge,” the band plays slow songs, like, “Just A Closer Walk With Thee.” Upon leaving the graveyard, the mood swings – literally. The band breaks into up tempo songs, rejoicing in both the liberation of the soul and the life it’s left behind.

The emotional effect must be experienced to be fully understood. It works on the level of the soul, a transformation of grief into joy. Said New Orleans trumpet master Sidney Bechet, “Music in New Orleans is as much a part of death as it is of life.”

Therein lies the fifth and deepest lesson of New Orleans: Redemption through art. We Americans have a remarkable talent for denial, for repressing unpleasant memories. We can lose a disastrous guerilla war and then, when a generation has passed, march off to another one. In New Orleans, they have a different way to deal with unpleasant memories. They turn them into music, and they throw a parade.

Even before the Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was a death-haunted city. Everyone knew the Big One was coming. They just didn’t know when, the same way Angelenos think about earthquakes. But in New Orleans, death has always been tied to rebirth. It’s no accident that the best-loved song of New Orleans is about resurrection. “When the Saints Go Marching In,” is the Book of Revelations without the Four Horsemen or the Apocalypse. It skips straight to the New Jerusalem, where Gabriel’s trumpet sounds just like Louis Armstrong.

Now, I don't mean to paint New Orleans as a delta Utopia. I speak of her strengths, because we've all heard far too much about her weaknesses. Certainly, the hurricane ripped open ugly wounds of racism and resentment. It proved that corruption can kill. So can change of climate and destruction of wetlands. With one-third of its population still scattered, the New Orleans Diaspora is biblical in scale. By the waters of Babylon, they wept, as they do today in the apartment blocks of Houston and the trailer parks of Mississippi.

But the failings of New Orleans are not only her own. Today, as our roads and bridges crumble, as the rich secede from the rest, as government sells itself to the highest bidder, we all live in New Orleans. Anyone who thinks they're insulated from her catastrophe is as deluded as those who believed that levees could save them from hurricanes, or oceans could shield them from terrorists. If America cannot muster the resources to rebuild New Orleans, how can it take on the greater task of reconstructing itself? When we save New Orleans, we're really saving America's soul.

I have faith that the Big Easy will rise again. Yes, from a rational standpoint, it makes no sense to rebuild below sea level on hurricane alley. But to anyone who's lived there, rationality was never the highest truth. Not to rebuild New Orleans is simply unthinkable. It may take twenty years, and it may look very different from the city before the deluge. But she's done it before, many times over, and by St. Jude, she will do it again, with us or without us.

The highest truth is that it is we who need New Orleans, to sound the trumpets for our own resurrections. By her example, may we recreate a nation which celebrates its differences, which gives us each room to make our own joyful noise, in which efficiency is measured by our souls rather than our watches and our wallets. Instead of looking away from our dark sides, pretending our land is not poisoned by hatred, greed and exploitation, may we face them and transform them. Lord, I want to be in that number, when the sun begins to shine, when a new world is revealed, when the saints go marching in.