

CHOOSING TO GO HOME

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Home is supposed to be a safe place, encompassing not only physical safety but also emotional well being, comfort, positive relationships, and a sense of security. But when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in the summer of 2005, homes were destroyed. Houses were physically washed away and families were scattered. With them went their sense of security in their homes, as people were forced to not only leave their city, but begin to live, work, and attend school in other places. Three years later, very little progress has been made with rebuilding people's homes. Many people feel that the citizens of New Orleans should be satisfied living their new lives in the "homes" that have been established for them in other cities, despite New Orleanians' desire to go back. Those who expect the survivors of Katrina not to go back to New Orleans fail to understand that an important part of home is choice and that the community of home is unique.

As we began our project in the fall of 2007, our initial thought about New Orleans was that the homes that had been destroyed needed to be rebuilt. As middle-class Americans with the ability to move from house to house, we consider home a building. We believed the same would be true for those in New Orleans and so we focused on structural rebuilding as the greatest need. However, as we engaged in our research and in-city project of interviewing church pastors about their transformation from spiritual guides to community organizers, and as we met with and interviewed pastors from the New Orleans Churches Supporting Churches (CSC) organization during our December 2007 in-city work, we learned that home is not just a building; home for the pastors includes faith, family, and community, all of which cannot be replaced simply by moving to a new house.

Our research process thus developed into a study of the psychological importance of the concept of "home." In *Educational Psychology*, John Santrock discusses Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which details in order of importance the aspects that people need in their life in order to reach their full potential (2006, p. 416). The most important needs are physical, such as food, water, and shelter. Directly after these basics are met, people need a sense of security and the feeling of love and belonging. The people who were dislocated to other cities during and after Katrina have found ways to provide for the first stage of needs, including water, food, and shelter, but the next stages in Maslow's hierarchy – security, love, and belongingness – are



all qualities that, for many, could be provided if they moved back to New Orleans.

OUR COMMUNITY, OUR HOME

While interviewing, we discovered that New Orleans offers the sense of security, love, and belonging to its community members that they don't necessarily feel in other cities, and for this reason, many people who have not been able to come back to New Orleans since Katrina are still working toward doing so. Pastor Charles Duplessis of CSC, in his interview, explains it by saying, "We're people who love our community, who see the history of it, who wanted to come back in a better way" (personal communication, December 18, 2007). The ideas that Pastor DuPlessis speak about are not unique to his community's situation. Throughout New Orleans, people are looking to come back to New Orleans because of its history, because they love it, and because they want it to be improved. Essentially, they want to come "home."

One of the most important aspects of New Orleans's culture and one of the aspects that makes it "home" to so many people are the strong family relationships that are evident throughout New Orleans. It is not unusual

for grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and immediate families to live within a few miles of each other. Family meals and celebrations are common experiences, and family members play important parts in each others' lives. Unfortunately, this is not always true in other cities, which may be part of the reason New Orleans residents do not feel as at home in other places. While some displaced New Orleanian families have been able to establish bonds similar to this, it is generally rare in urban life.

While in New Orleans, we were able to get a taste of this commitment to family through interviews with five pastors of Churches Supporting Churches. The pastors told us unique stories about the city and their Katrina experiences, but all of them stressed the importance of New Orleans culture, which is made up of faith, family, and community. Pastor Donald Boutte of CSC said, "New Orleans, with all its problems . . . has very close family ties and family is important to folk in New Orleans . . . I don't care where you go, it's a value in this city. And because it's gotten lost across this country I think that's something that needs to be preserved" (personal communication, December 19, 2007).

Family ties are an aspect of New Orleans culture that helps make the city feel like home to so many people. After Katrina, many families were not able to find housing or jobs in the same area and were scattered across various cities. While a daily life that includes family members outside of immediate family is not necessarily an expectation for all Americans, for people in New Orleans it had a great impact on their lives. This was evident when interviewing Charles DuPlessis. In getting to know his family, which included Germanie, the granddaughter for whom he and his wife provide primary care, Rev. Duplessis talked about caring for his granddaughter, and other ministers talked about family gatherings on a regular basis. Even those of us from Defiance College were treated like family from the moment we stepped foot into their communities. To remove this constant family-type interaction from people who expect it disrupts their daily lives and strips away the sense of security, love, and belonging that all individuals need. Because the concept of "home" is deeply intertwined with "family," going back home to New Orleans is not just a desire or something that would be "nice" for these folk; it is a necessity.

While in New Orleans, we found that New Orlinians feel that they belong there. The communities in which they live, work, worship, and attend school all provide that sense of belonging needed for an individual to reach his or her full potential. The indispensable quality of love is often provided through strong family ties as those common in New Orleans. Only when someone is able to identify positive relationships with others, such as a good

relationship between a child and his or her grandparent, is he or she truly able to develop a positive self image. This was shown in the relationship between Rev. Duplessis and his granddaughter. Germanie, if not cared for by her grandparents, would be not only struggling with growing up but also struggling with her sense of belonging. For Germanie, home is with her grandparents and for her grandparents, home is New Orleans. Belonging and love, when combined with the basic needs of water, food, and shelter, work together to create a home that means so much more than just a house to live in or a place to stay. Home creates a sense of safety and security.

In addition to families, many people in New Orleans look to their churches and their church families as a way to find love and belonging. We, as outsiders walking into a church family, were accepted, loved, even hugged from the moment we were spotted in the parking lot of a church we attended while in New Orleans. We were welcomed into a family with no questions asked, a rare event in the United States proper but a way of life in the New Orleans community. Because of our experience in New Orleans, we now understand that the church is often seen as the center of a community. Rev. DuPlessis describes how church and community membership work together to create a home by saying, “The church was a haven, a rallying point for the community, the African-American community, but other communities too” (personal communication, December 18, 2007). Rev. Boutte paints a picture of how important the church is to the former residents of New Orleans when he says, “Even if they can’t get home, they’ll get as close as they can. And so they’ll come into church, they’re not there every Sunday. They might attend service once a month, some twice a month but then again the escalating price of gas is half of that [reason former residents are not attending every week]” (Personal communication, December 19, 2007). This example of people struggling financially to spend time at church, their home, on a Sunday morning exemplifies the need for home and the belonging that goes along with it. Failing to provide the means for people to return to a church that played such an essential role in their lives is the same as not allowing them to go home.

If we are to look beyond basic physical needs and realize that identity is defined by what surrounds us and what we choose to surround ourselves with, we will understand that a city has its own special way of defining identity. Karen Wells of Birkbeck College, University of London, says that “the city presses on the senses and the defining sensory experience of the city is its impact on sight” (2007, p. 137). Cities shape identity in a very sense-based, physical way, and New Orleans is no different. This city has shaped the identity of its residents through emotionally charged, uplifting religious services that help individuals bond with one another. We witnessed

this viscerally when we attended the church service during our stay in the city. We felt in a physical way the emotional bond that faith, family and community together can offer. New Orleans is a unique city in this respect.

However, if we are to look at New Orleans in its entirety today, the sight is not recognizable as home. If we focus on the other sensory experiences of the city pressing on us, we understand that New Orleans is not quite what people would ordinarily choose as home. People wanting to come “home” to New Orleans are doing so in hopes of the city returning to the community they remember, but houses are still in ruin. Areas exist that have not yet been touched by relief efforts.

Still, the citizens of New Orleans want to return. It is the memory of the security, love, and belonging of this faith and family-oriented home that brings them back. Wrapped up in the sense of home is the culture of the city. In his interview, Pastor Jarone Dabon says of New Orleans, “If we could get the culture back, that would be great for this city. You don’t want the city to lose its culture. . . . We have crime but our culture outweighs our crime” (personal communication, December 18, 2007). Rev. Dabon wants the rest of the nation to see that their culture is part of what makes New Orleans home, and without the full return of the city’s culture, the former residents will feel displaced.

New Orleans is a diverse city where historically African, African-American, French, French-Cajun, Spanish, English, and Native-American communities blended together. New Orleans is also a city of very poor people, most of whom are people of color. Hughey and Vidich discuss the relationship between such multi-ethnic environments and political and economic forces in Third World countries. Their discussions can be applied to New Orleans, which currently has some economic features of Third World countries. Hughey and Vidich assert that while multiculturalism focuses on the denial of “proper recognition by the political, economic, and intellectual dominance of white men,” the reality of a multicultural environment is much more complex. (1992, p. 179). New Orleans is such a complex environment. It appears that residents who lost everything as a result of hurricanes Katrina and Rita have been ignored because of the color of their skin and the thinness of their wallets. Rev. Jerone Dabon implies this when he says he lives in a bad neighborhood, but he also reveals a positive element when he says he sees a purpose in his neighborhood. After all, his “bad neighborhood” is home to him. He feels empowered in that neighborhood, and he believes that his neighborhood church is so socially and spiritually valuable that it also must have economic value. He declares, “We are standing on faith that someone’s going to come and see the place and see that we truly need help because we

are there on Sundays . . . and I guess if we have light, 'we be there every day.' We are in a bad neighborhood, but I feel that God has that church there for a purpose" (personal communication, December 18, 2007).

Rev. Don Boutte sheds more light on the valued part of multicultural New Orleans that is implicit in Dabon's talk. He points to a key commonality among most of the ethnicities of New Orleans when he says, "There is a large poverty level in this city and there are a lot of things that are wrong. One of the things that I think is most helpful is the strong family values" (personal communication, December 19, 2008). The value of family, of extended family in particular, is an important part of historic African-American, French-Cajun, Spanish, and Native-American communities. These cultures use family connections to ensure personal and social empowerment, and sometimes even economic and political empowerment.

Each city has its own kind of culture, Wells explains. She goes on to say that the culture of people living in an urban environment "is little noticed by its practitioners: After all, living in the city is . . . about the practice of everyday life" (2007, p. 138). The practice of everyday life in New Orleans is all about a "home" of family and faith. Moving to a different city is not going to be comfortable to most residents of New Orleans because other cities lack the particular complex mixture of cultures and economic and political interactions of New Orleans. Because the dwellers of other cities do not understand the lifestyle and cultural values of New Orleans, they may not be sensitive to the needs of displaced New Orleanians.

This is where the issue of what "home" means really matters. Hughey and Vidich say that "middle-class Americans . . . began to move from house to house—perceiving their 'home' mainly as real estate, as an object of speculation in value—often without ever developing a strong attachment to any particular street or neighborhood" (1992, p. 164). For the people of New Orleans, this is not a definition of "home." Their home has been built through family, faith and a multicultural community. As Rev. Dabon said, "Look at our culture. We have the French Quarter. We have Mardi Gras. We have the church that plays a great part in a lot of people's lives" (personal communication, December 18, 2007). Rev. Marvin Turner, another Churches Supporting Churches' pastor, noted that New Orleans is like one big neighborhood in which everyone cares for one another. Understanding this is essential to understanding New Orleans culture.

In contrast, many in the United States say that they want former New Orleans residents to be happy in new cities and not focus on rebuilding in their old city, which thus pushes aside the culture and the needs of the

displaced. Why is there such a disregard for the unique concept of family, faith, and community as home in New Orleans? According to Hughey and Vidich, one reason for cultural insensitivity could be that “America’s dominant Anglo-Protestant groups expected the immigrant to ‘melt’ or, more accurately, to assimilate to their norms, values, and cultural styles” (1992, p. 159). The United States, or more specifically the Caucasian population, seems to want the various ethnicities of New Orleans to assimilate to the Caucasian customs in other cities rather than concern themselves with rebuilding New Orleans and restoring its culture.

Because they cannot afford to return home, former residents of New Orleans may be searching to be accepted in a new place, making money, not personal choice, the central issue. For those struggling to be accepted elsewhere, acceptance often means putting aside their cultural heritage. Hughey and Vidich push this point by saying that in previous centuries, the Caucasian-based American view was that “old world ethnicity stood in the way of their acceptance as full-fledged Americans. Acceptance was precisely what they desired, and most were willing to cast aside their ethnic heritage to attain it” (1992, p. 162). But this is not true in New Orleans. Rather than trying to conform, different cultures in New Orleans not only live together but celebrate their ethnic particularities as members of one large, interesting, complex family. Rev. Marvin Turner explains this eloquently, by saying, “We have different cultures here from everywhere and we can exist and get along” (personal communication, December 18, 2007). Rev. Turner sees the difference between his city and other cities, and he wants that difference honored.

CONCLUSIONS

Home must be a choice. This is what we learned as we developed a McMaster School project focused on interviewing pastors of Churches Supporting Churches, interviews now being used to educate people in Ohio about the reasons for restoring New Orleans. The way in which the people of New Orleans define “home” offers a central motivation for restoration because to enjoy security and a sense of belonging, individuals must be allowed to choose where home should be. Providing for people’s basic physical needs alone in other locations does not fully support and may ultimately limit them since by changing what these individuals consider home, we are changing one of the ways that people are able to define themselves. Instead, we must work to help New Orleanians return to the city where they feel they belong, the city that they consider home. Without this work at restoration, their interaction with their families, sense of security, and right to feel empowered in their daily lives is limited. The culture of

faith, family, and community defines the folk of New Orleans, and they will become empowered when their home is restored to them.

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