

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

AT THE GYM, CLIMBING A STAIRCASE THAT GOES nowhere, I watched a commentator on CNN mourn the death of New Orleans. Perhaps the city will be rebuilt, he said, but it will never be the same. And for the first time since Hurricane Katrina had crashed into the Gulf Coast, I felt not only mounting grief and anger but also a pang of regret, because I'd seen many great cities in my life, but I'd never seen New Orleans.

I remember a conversation I had a couple of years ago with a friend who told me New Orleans was one of the most hauntingly beautiful cities in America: vivid, earthy, sultry. Don't miss it, he said. It's unforgettable. And now, instead of picture-postcard memories of a romantic weekend in New Orleans, all I have is a postcard from hell: shameful, sickening images of people stranded with no food or water, waiting day after interminable day for a sign that they haven't been left to die.

I wonder, though: If I had visited New Orleans back when I had the chance, how far would I have ventured from my comfortable hotel? How much would I have seen of a city in which one in four people lived in poverty in rotting tenements and shotgun shacks; a city in which health clinics were understaffed and crime was endemic and the public schools were among the worst in the country? Entranced by the exotic street scene in the French Quarter, by the unforgettable music and unforgettable food, what would I have seen of the New Orleans where poor black people struggled every day to find high ground amid the rising waters of their lives?

I'VE READ THAT GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS SPENT two years working on an evacuation plan for New Orleans — a plan that didn't address how to evacuate the more than one hundred thousand people too poor to own a car. Everyone rightly condemns the sniper who fired at a rescue helicopter, but what about those in authority who botched the rescue effort from the start? What crimes are they guilty of? Let's ask those who lived in the low-lying areas that were the first to flood, left to fend for themselves as their more affluent neighbors fled to safety.

WHEN I WAS A NEWSPAPER REPORTER IN THE 1960s, I frequently wrote about race and poverty. I interviewed scholars. I spent time in poor black neighborhoods talking with teachers and social workers and advocates for welfare rights. But I wasn't black, and I wasn't poor. Later, after I started *The Sun*, I lived for many years from hand to mouth. But I had two college degrees and marketable skills, had I chosen to market them. I may have been broke, but I never felt trapped in poverty, or a part of a permanent underclass. So what can someone like me really know about being black and poor in America — about the way racism crushes a man like a monstrous wave, and poverty, like a razor wind, strips him to the bone?

AM I A COMPASSIONATE PERSON? I TRY TO BE. Do I believe in racial equality? Of course I do. I'm the editor of *The Sun*. I live in a progressive co-housing community with

some of the most socially conscious people I've ever known. But out of thirty-three households, there isn't one black person among us. Fourteen people are on the staff of *The Sun* — all of us white.

THE TWENTY THOUSAND PEOPLE TRAPPED IN the New Orleans Superdome have finally been evacuated. But how many people will die around the world today of hunger and malnutrition? Twenty thousand. And tomorrow? Twenty thousand. And the day after tomorrow? Twenty thousand.

MARK TWAIN: "REMEMBER THE POOR. IT COSTS nothing."

THE POOR STAY POOR. THE RICH GET RICHER. This is the land of the free, and you'd better be brave. And when God blesses America, make sure you're standing toward the front of the line, not way back in the barrios of New Mexico, or in a high-rise housing project in Chicago, or packed twenty to a room in a migrant shack in North Carolina. Make sure God spells your name right. Make sure you get a receipt.

THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE HAVE DIED HORRIBLE deaths. Does life go on? Life goes on. And one day the floodwaters will carry the rest of us away, too: black and white, rich and poor. Soon enough, we'll all be standing on the rooftops of our lives, calling to God to save us, surrounded by the crumbling levees we knew would never last. Soon enough, we'll all be gliding down the watery boulevards of New Orleans, swimming under the elegant balconies, darting in and out of the rusting streetcars, greeting old departed friends who've saved a seat for us at the crowded tables of Café du Monde.

YESTERDAY I OVERHEARD A MAN SAY THAT EVERY-one gets worked up momentarily about a disaster of this magnitude; then, a few weeks later, we forget the whole thing. I wanted to object, but I knew it was true. Last December, all I could think about were the 250,000 people who'd been killed in the South Asia tsunami. Now I can't recall the last time they crossed my mind.

"WE CAN'T FORGET," MY FRIEND C. SAID. "FORGET-ting what happened to the people of New Orleans will exact too high a price. We can't just send off a check, and cry again over the images, and pretend there's nothing left for us to do."

LAST NIGHT I CAME ACROSS SOME LINES I'D scribbled down after the tsunami. They're the words of a Muslim cleric in Sri Lanka: "Some of those who went to their morning prayers on that day did not pray in the afternoon. This is the lesson for everyone. . . . Yesterday is gone; tomorrow is doubtful. We have only the present moment to do good works, to love each other, and to praise God."