

# Your Personal Coach

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Like all horrific and tragic events, Hurricane Katrina has revealed powerful insights about the human spirit. The heartbreaking loss of life, destruction of property, disappearance of even the most basic necessities, dangerous and catastrophic conditions create an unforgettable backdrop to reveal both the best and the worst in human nature.

I watch the television news, transfixed by the overwhelming devastation of New Orleans, Biloxi, Mobile, and other Gulf Coast communities – large cities and small towns -- and am in awe of the courage and compassion shown in these images of people of all ages and races: Neighbors guide neighbors through flooded streets. Courageous Coast Guardsmen navigate a tangle of electrical wires then drop by slender lines from hovering helicopters to rescue people from the rooftops of collapsing buildings. In video images from the Superdome, I see simple acts of kindness and a sharing of the few resources that are available. A man passes a pack of crackers, a sip of water to an old woman. Volunteer citizens in boats fish out survivors from filthy water. First responders risk their own lives to save those of strangers while their own destroyed homes and families go untended.

Anheuser Busch, Lowe's, Home Depot, Wal-Mart, Office Depot, Winn-Dixie, Target and scores of other American corporations pledge millions of dollars for disaster relief. Ordinary citizens around the country reach into their own pockets or organize fundraisers to donate money to the Red Cross, Salvation Army, and other helping organizations. Rescue teams from Ohio, California, Massachusetts, Michigan, Texas, and dozens of other states race to the stricken areas. Citizens of New York City – no strangers to the suffering of sudden and disastrous events – line up around the block to donate blood for their southern brethren.

And amidst this destruction and while compassion and courage abound in New Orleans, others break into stores to steal – not just necessities like food or water which, under the circumstances, is more than justified. But thieves go not just for the life-sustaining and, instead, turn their greedy attention to television sets, microwaves, and jewelry. The gun section of a new Wal-Mart is cleaned out in minutes. Outnumbered police officers and the National Guard stand by helplessly as men and women ransack stores and race through swollen streets with their loot. This crime spree cannot be their priority, after all, the first order of business is to save lives and rescue survivors.

Police officers on the rooftop of a ravaged hotel are fired on by thugs on the street. One officer is shot in the head. A nurse – getting a quick breath of fresh air outside her smothering and devastated hospital – is robbed at gunpoint. The historic French Quarter – on somewhat higher ground – is spared the worst of the flooding, but its prime boutiques and stores become a favorite target of thieves. Armed gangs roam the city and the mayhem hinders private ambulance services from rescuing twenty-five critically ill infants from Children's Hospital and more than one hundred babies from Touro Infirmary. Someone shoots at an Army rescue helicopter and halts the evacuation of 20,000 suffering people from the squalid and deteriorating Superdome.

In a day's time, New Orleans – The Big Easy – has become a city of refugees. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is shaping up to be the worst natural disaster in our nation's history, a tragedy on the scale of 9/11 and the Indonesian Tsunami of 2004. And

just as we learned during those terrible events, human beings are capable of just about anything.

In the coming months and years, the experts and the pundits will analyze this disaster. We will question why the authorities were not better prepared for the potential horror that had been predicted for decades as they considered the fragility of the Crescent City and the disaster looming from a direct hit from a major hurricane. Sociologists will, and should, weigh in about income discrepancies and how municipalities can better serve their poorest constituents -- before disaster strikes -- by making certain that every member of their community has transportation to and a safe place to ride out the storm. Ordinary citizens will wonder how major news organizations and The Weather Channel were able to get their reporters and resources in place in advance of the wrath of Katrina while FEMA, the Red Cross, and local, state, and federal authorities were not. There will, no doubt, be enough blame to go around. We will learn from this experience and, hopefully, be better prepared for the future and inevitable ravages from nature.

Nature may be brutal, but she is understandable. As I write this, and as despair and lawlessness grip what was one of America's most beautiful cities, I can't seem to stop thinking about *human* nature. Who are we? Are we one of the nurses who gently cradle stranded newborns as we pray for relief, for a helicopter or ambulance to take our infant charges to safety? Are we someone who shares precious water with someone more in need than ourselves? Or are we looters, wearing stolen jewelry or lugging television sets, as we wander through sodden streets creating an even bigger crisis as we set fires, rape women, or take potshots at law officers or rescue workers?

Do we bring courage and compassion or do we, instead, bring selfish, violent self-interest? In the wake of Katrina, we have once again learned that adversity does not create character but, rather, adversity *reveals* character. Who are we as human beings, after all?

It seems we are everyone.

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