



**LOUISIANA DISASTER
RECOVERY FOUNDATION**
Louisiana's Fund for Louisiana's People

REMAKING LOUISIANA: THE CALL TO A NEW ADVENTURE

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I have been asked to share with you some thoughts about how the work we do together fits conceptually into the framework of our democracy; especially the challenge our founders described as forming a more perfect union. The historian Arthur Schlesinger once wrote that the United States is never fixed or final. We are a nation, he said, that is always in the making. The same is true of Louisiana. We are a community of people that is always in the making.

Ever so often in our history we have been called to a new adventure. Whether it was defending our coastal waters from piracy or using our coastal shores as a port to fuel the American economy, the people of Louisiana responded. Whether it was creating a new culture out of our diversity or creating a new people out of our differences, the people of Louisiana responded.

Once again, we are called to a new adventure. This time it is the remaking of an economy, the restoration of a culture and the reconciliation of a people in the aftermath of a disaster. I use the word remaking rather than rebuilding because the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation (LDRF) committed part of its resources from the outset to helping build a state that would be better than it was before the hurricanes. We can all agree, despite our many differences, that the hurricanes of 2005 created an opportunity to form a more perfect state; although we differ on how this is to be done. I remain optimistic that we can still build a better Louisiana, but I am reminded of the caution offered some years ago by the psychiatrist and writer Scott Peck who wrote that we build community out of crisis and we build community by accident, but we do not know how to build community by design. He went on to suggest that the problem with building community out of crisis is that once the crisis is over, so usually is the spirit of community.

The question leaders in all sectors of our state must now address is, how do we build community by design? How do we sustain the sense of community we shared during the hurricanes now that the intensity of the crisis is no longer as visible? How do we include all of our citizens in the attempt to remake Louisiana? Is there some formula or framework that can help us face the challenges that still linger three years after Katrina and Rita? Many consultants with a string of credentials have parachuted into the state with ideas for a new Louisiana, and while some of them have been useful, I want to appeal today to one that is as old as our democracy, yet as current as the foreboding threats of new hurricanes.

When the founders of our nation set out to form a more perfect union, they wrote into the preamble to the American constitution that we would have to establish justice; and while they did not include people like me in their embrace, they, nevertheless, had the language right. When they set out to ensure domestic tranquility, they said we would have to promote the general welfare. Even when they set out to provide for the common defense, they understood that if we were to demonstrate the efficacy of our democracy to critics abroad we would have to demonstrate that it could work equitably for all of our citizens at home.

I want to suggest today that these principles were not only good for the leaders of that time, but good advice for all times. Those who wrote the constitution were seeking to build an independent nation. We are seeking to cope with an interdependent world. They were trying to integrate a diverse people into a national community. We must learn to live together in a state that is integrating and fragmenting at the same time. Yet, I am convinced that the original principles still apply and want, thus, to look briefly at the implications of three of them for the remaking of Louisiana.

Establishing Justice

If we are to remake Louisiana into a more perfect union, we will need to start where the framers of the constitution started, committing ourselves to establishing justice. They did not suggest that they had established justice; they set up a framework for future generations to continue their goal of establishing justice. And that is why a priority of the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation has been equity and inclusion. We take seriously the admonition in the preamble to the American constitution to establish justice. The “j” word – “justice” – is not often a part of the public discourse about rebuilding Louisiana as it was not much in vogue before the hurricanes, and that is the first reason why we prefer remaking to rebuilding.

Remaking Louisiana must begin with a concept of community in which we recognize and protect the dignity of difference. We in Louisiana have always understood that the more diverse we are, the richer our culture becomes, and the more expansive our horizon of possibilities. Jonathan Sacks, the British Rabbi who wrote the book, *The Home We Build Together*, argues that if we were all the same we would have nothing unique to contribute, nor any thing to learn from each other. Yet, if we were completely different we could not communicate and if we were exactly alike, we would have nothing to say. So the Rabbi concludes that we need to see our differences as gifts to the common good, for without a compelling sense of the common good, difference spells discord and creates, not music, but noise.

Remaking Louisiana must include a second element, a new paradigm of patriotism in which we reaffirm with the founders of the nation that the primary passion of the patriot should be the passion for justice. I have served my country in the military and the U.S. government, but I consider myself to have been as much a patriot in Alabama when I organized the local civil rights movement; for I was continuing the efforts of our founders to form a more perfect union. Almost half a century since Dr. King gave his spell-binding “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial, we find new groups among those targeted, but the prejudice and discrimination remain just as insidious and the need for the engagement of

people of goodwill just as critical. Despite our best intentions and some times heroic efforts, bias and bigotry still traffic the streets of our state with an intensity that distracts from our ideals, diminishes our image and saps our strength.

Remaking Louisiana will need to include a third element, a new paradigm of participation. If the map for remaking the state is to have legs and to endure, all of our citizens will need to have their voices heard. If democracy is really to work in Louisiana, we will need to empower the poor and the marginalized to participate in the deliberations about their future. It is not enough simply to be advocates who speak in behalf of the poor in our communities: we must help empower them to speak for themselves. One of the most striking and fundamental lessons coming from around the world is that when we empower the historically excluded to be active participants in the programs designed for their advancement, we are likely to have not only new ideas and wider ownership of strategies, but increased effectiveness as well.

We have all too often asked the wrong question in dealing with those who suffer from prejudice and poverty. We have been asking what can we do about their predicament or what can we do for them when we should have been asking what can we do together. Self-help is a principle all groups admire and often desire, but too many people assume it means that those disadvantaged by condition or color should be able to lift themselves by their own bootstraps, even when they have no boots. At LDRF, we prefer the concept of assisted self-reliance or participatory empowerment where the affected groups provide leadership but they are supported by outside resources.

Promoting the General Welfare

So we come now to the second dimension of our call to a new adventure. The architects of our constitution did not just call on us to establish justice; they called on us to promote the general welfare, not just the welfare of those seeking to retain power, but the welfare of those seeking to acquire power as well. They saw democracy as a system in which the people have the power, but for many it has come to mean a system in which the people have the vote, which is not always the same as having the power.

How do we promote the general welfare? The one thing that I know for sure from my experience in government, business and civil society is that no one sector can do it alone. We need business, government and the community organizations representing the poorest of the poor at the table together. Peter Drucker, the management guru, called this a fourth sector of collaboration, a partnership in which all three sectors of our democracy work together rather than separately.

How do we build community by design? It has been my experience that when neighbors help neighbors, and even when strangers help strangers, both those who help and those who are helped are not only transformed, but they experience a new sense of connectedness. Getting involved in the needs of the neighbor provides a new perspective, a new way of seeing ourselves, a new understanding of the purpose of the human journey. When that which was “their” problem becomes “our” problem, the transaction transforms a mere association into a relationship that has the potential for new communities of meaning and belonging.

In other words, doing something for someone else – what John Winthrop called making the condition of others our own – is a powerful force in building community. When you experience the problems of the poor or troubled, when you help the homeless to find a home or those who are hungry to find food, when you help to dispel prejudices or fight bigotry directed at your neighbors, you are far more likely to find common ground, and you are likely to find that in serving others you discover the genesis of community. So the moral imperative that has driven this foundation has been to help transform the laissez-faire notion of live and let live into the principle of live and help live.

Developing and Promoting a New Generation of Leaders

Finally, if we are to have a government of the people, by the people and for the people of this state, we need leaders in the capital, in board rooms, in religious institutions and in civil society who understand that leadership is a call to service and not simply a call to power; leaders who understand the relationship between economic competitiveness and equity and inclusion; leaders, in other words, who understand that if we are to form a more perfect union we will need to establish justice, and if we are to enjoy domestic tranquility on the streets of New Orleans as well as in the communities along the bayous, we will have to promote the general welfare.

We have for too long looked in the wrong places for leadership, preferring experience over judgment and pragmatism over principles. For more than a decade, I have been living full or part time in South Africa and I have learned something very important about leadership. I watched closely as leaders and heads of royal families beat a path to the door of Nelson Mandela to seek his advice and counsel on the great issues of the day. He became the most consulted and respected leader of his time, although he was in prison while the world economy was becoming interdependent. He was in prison while we were developing the internet. He was in prison while we were becoming addicted to the cell phone. He was in prison while we were being seduced by the notion that experience trumps wisdom and judgment. But he came out of prison, took over the leadership of his party and his country and never missed a beat because for him leadership was a way of being rather than simply the mastery of a set of specialized functions, management competencies or public experiences. Mandela was successful because of the elegance of his humanity, the strength of his ideals, and his ability to look beyond the evidence and see alternative possibilities. Finally, he was successful because he understood that you are most likely to inspire hope in others when you embody in your own life story the change you seek.

Here in New Orleans on this commemoration of the third anniversary of Katrina, I am once again reminded that we in the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation have supported an effort to build a new generation of leaders who will learn from Mandela that leadership is a way of being, a set of values rather than simply a set of experiences. As the baby boomer generation is replaced by those we call generation Xers, we want to ensure that the leaders of Louisiana will no longer be the butt of every joke about corruption and inefficiency. Instead, I hope we will be remembered for having taken Robert Kennedy seriously when he said in South Africa forty years ago:

Let no one be discouraged by the belief that there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills – against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence ... Few

will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.”

I believe that we have in Louisiana a new generation of leaders who have the potential to bend history itself. To paraphrase Robert Kennedy, each time those of you in this audience, or others like you, stand up for an ideal, or act to improve the lot of others, or strike out against injustice, you send out a ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of resistance.

Let me repeat. Those of you in this room have within you the greatness to bend history, so let us go out and prove the critics wrong.

We can remake Louisiana.

We can once again heed the call to a new adventure.

We can bend history itself.