

Embracing Home
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All Souls Church, Unitarian, Washington, DC

Service Description: Nearly eight years after the decimation of Hurricane Katrina, those who call New Orleans home are still struggling to recapture a normal life—a task made harder by institutional racism and classism. Why does home matter? How do we face devastating loss and systemic injustice? Where can we look for support, healing, and transformation?

Reading:

Excerpt from “To be of use” by Marge Piercy

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who stand in the line and haul in their places,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.

Sermon:

The Lower 9th Ward house we pulled up to was the bright turquoise color I associate with 1950s kitchen cabinets. The front of the house had 2 “X-codes” spray-painted on it, codes that told you what the post-Katrina search and rescue teams found when they went door to door after the flood. “9-17” at the top of the X indicated that the house was searched on September 17th, 2005 – 18 days after the hurricane. The acronym on the left side identified the search team. The “0” at the bottom meant no bodies were found inside.

It was raining that day, and we had abandoned the *outdoor* work initially planned for us; instead being assigned to *indoor* jobs until the rain stopped. Our van was full of 10 teenagers, myself, and Alex – who was driving. As Alex and I, the two adults, walked up to the porch of the house, we realized that calling this house “indoors” was generous *at best*.

The entire north side of the house had been torn off, as had the back of the house, and what roof remained was soft and leaky. Our team leader arrived and explained what we would be doing that day – first, moving a huge pile of rusty-nail-filled debris into the dumpster, then yanking out as much of the house’s electrical wire as we could reach.

The copper hidden inside these lifeless wires was the main source of saleable value remaining in the house. The family who owned the house had just been given 30 days to prove that they were repairing the house, otherwise the city would tear it down. In a neighborhood filled with old porch stairways that lead nowhere since their houses had been carried away by Katrina, it’s surprising that *this house* is considered a blight.

Our team leader walked Alex and I carefully around the damp shell of the house, telling us not to step into any of the 3 bedrooms in case the floor caved in beneath us. Not to touch the support beams in case they collapsed and pulled the roof down on us. Signs of drug addiction peeked out from under a damp carpet square in the second room... broken lighter, bent spoon.

I thought of the 10 youth in the van, eating lemonheads, listening to Rihanna on the radio, and posting updates about beignets and po-boys to facebook from their smartphones. That’s what I had been doing in the van too, before we arrived. The schoolbus yellow ponchos we had brought were little better than those flimsy plastic tablecloths used for children’s birthday parties.

I didn’t know these teens well – I knew they were all smart and kind, but I didn’t know how they would react to this house. I didn’t know whether they had ever seen addiction like this... whether they had seen loss like this... how they would respond to finding out that despite the dangerous and dilapidated state of this house, despite the lack of plumbing or electricity or any basic safety, *a man lived here*. The owner of the broken lighter and the bent spoon. I didn’t know how they would respond when we met him as we worked.

With little safety gear, and barely adequate tools, I also thought that the house might collapse and we would all die.

Now, I’m the intern minister here. I’m a minister-in-training. Letting the roof collapse and flatten the high school youth group is not something you want to have on your record before you’re even ordained, you know?

Alex and I returned to the van.

“Ok, listen up everyone. Here’s the deal. This house we’re about to go into is falling apart. Anyone who goes inside has to be incredibly careful. We can only stand where our team leader tells us it’s safe. The entire side and back of the house have been torn off by the storm. The floor and roof are both unsteady. There’s drug paraphernalia on the ground.

Here is the rule: No one can die in the house, ok? Dying is not allowed. Do you all promise to be really careful and not die?”

I don’t think they thought I was as funny as I thought I was, but they looked back at me and said they promised not to die, and we all climbed out of the van into the rain.

We all crowded onto the porch and met Ms. Allison.¹ Ms. Allison is one of over 15 siblings who grew up in this 3 bedroom, 1,000 square foot house. She began to tell us her story – first pointing out her mother’s room, then the rooms where the children slept, then the kitchen, the living room. Her mother died a month after making the last mortgage payment on this house, decades ago, when Allison was only 18. When she tells us this, she begins to cry.

We hug for a minute, and over Allison’s shoulder I saw the serious looks on our group’s faces. Most of them aren’t 18 yet themselves. One of them, Jordana, lost her own mother less than a year ago.

The youth waited respectfully, and after a minute, Allison regained her voice.

Her mother didn’t leave a will, you see, and when she died, the ownership of the house was legally split between all of her living children and grandchildren. Though most of her extended family survived the hurricane itself, much of the family was displaced from New Orleans. Several of her siblings passed away from stress-related illnesses in the months following the storm. In the midst of overwhelming grief and trauma, the family could not gain access to disaster relief money for this house without somehow coming to consensus amongst over 15 family members scattered across the south who owned some stake in the now dilapidated house. She didn’t even know how to get in contact with some of them.

Without clear ownership lines, there is no relief money. So while much of this neighborhood has begun the process of rebuilding, this house has continued to fall apart.

We nodded as Allison spoke. Several days earlier, we had been told about the challenges this neighborhood has faced in the wake of the storm.

M.A. Sheehan, an All Souls member who now lives in New Orleans full time to help with the recovery effort, told us that:

“Before the levees failed, nearly two-thirds of Lower 9th Ward families were homeowners. In a neighborhood that was 98% African-American, this was significantly higher than the city average. Many of these families had lived in the neighborhood for decades, passing on the family home from generation to generation and building strong networks of support. More than half of the neighborhood homes were completely paid off. Children grew up surrounded by aunts and cousins and grandparents. The elders in the neighborhood weren’t wealthy, but they could live out their lives surrounded by family.

This picture has now changed completely. Between 2000 and 2010, the overall population of New Orleans declined by 20%, but the population of the Lower 9th Ward fell by 80%.

This was not because they didn’t want to come back. Most homeowners who qualified for recovery money wanted to rebuild their pre-Katrina homes. But this neighborhood – the neighborhood that suffered the greatest destruction from the failed levees – has also been last in line for recovery support.

There was no water service to much of the Lower 9th Ward for nearly a year following Katrina. Lacking water service, homeowners couldn’t receive FEMA trailers. Without FEMA trailers,

¹ Allison Brown

homeowners weren't present to protect repairable homes from demolition. They weren't able to gut and repair their homes, or build new ones. What little money they received often had to be spent on temporary housing elsewhere as they waited for the city infrastructure that would allow them back into their neighborhood."²

Ms. Allison's story is not unusual. Inequity and discrimination against low-income people and people of color are built into nearly every layer of United States society. The destruction of Hurricane Katrina caused trauma for all of New Orleans, but systemic racism and classism has slowed the healing of the Lower 9th Ward.

When Allison finished telling us her story, we all grasped hands and said a short prayer.

After the Amen, the youth instantly organized themselves into a human chain to carry debris from the house to the dumpster parked out front. For several days, we cleared debris, pulled down wiring, and meticulously stripped the dirty wires down to the shiny coils of copper within.

The more we got to know and love Ms. Allison and her family, the more purposeful we became. We were unskilled workers with little to offer beyond our time and care, but we did all we could.

It wasn't much... all of the wire from the house combined probably didn't sell for more than the cost of a few of our plane flights down there.

It still feels hard for me to feel like there is sense in any of it.

But is there ever sense in disaster? Trauma runs deeper than logic.

In an article written for Oxford American in the Fall of 2008 – 3 years post Katrina – David Ramsey, a New Orleans schoolteacher writes:

“Our students are afraid of rain. A heavy morning shower can cut attendance in half. I once had a student write an essay about her experience in the Superdome. She wrote, without explanation, that she lost her memory when she lost her grandmother in the storm. I was supposed to correct the grammar, so that she would be prepared for state testing in the spring.”³

Does flying a couple dozen unskilled workers from DC to New Orleans to do manual labor make sense from a resource-use perspective? Of course it doesn't. Did we still accomplish something of value?

I'd like to think that the help we gave Ms. Allison's family provided just enough of a emotional and monetary boost that they were able to continue their work to save their mother's home. I'd like to think that our work with Ms. Allison deepened her relationships with neighborhood aid organizations, which will support the rebuilding long after we returned to DC. I'd like to think that the prayer, and the hugs, and the laughter helped. What I know is that their rebuilding has

² Paraphrased from MA's grant proposal to help connect remaining residents to Road Home money.

³ Excerpt from the Fall 2008 Oxford American Article “I WILL REMAIN EVER FAITHFUL: How Lil Wayne Helped Me Survive My First Year of Teaching in New Orleans” by David Ramsey

continued, neighborhood organizations have donated lumber to them, and in the pictures Ms. Allison sent me this weekend, the house now looks like something being built, rather than something falling down.

And I know that the experience transformed us. Before we were a goofy, unorganized pile of DC Unitarians in a van. In working for Ms. Allison, we became a fine-tuned debris-removal and electrical wire salvaging team. Before, we had seen the destruction from a removed distance, like so many of the busloads of “disaster tourists” we saw drive through the Lower 9th Ward. In working for Ms. Allison, we touched into a common humanity, a common experience of suffering, compassion, and resilience. And the prayer, the hugs, and the laughter transformed us too.

Ms. Allison has vaulted over so many hurdles in trying to access FEMA money for rebuilding. These hurdles were put in place by a broken system that has failed the city of New Orleans and the residents of the lower 9th Ward over and over and over again. It’s an uphill battle, but she is continuing her steady climb. Ms. Allison’s home... her family home... the home she was born in and grew up in... is worth it.

When Ms. Allison spoke tearfully of losing her mother when she was so young, and inheriting this house alongside her siblings, I looked over at Jordana. At 18, Jordana and her brother had lost their mother and inherited her house as well. Through tragedy, she too had been forced into great responsibility during a time of deep grief. Race, class, religion and age separated Allison and Jordana, but Jordana’s faced showed only a sad look of understanding.

When Ms. Allison shared her grief with us, a space opened in our little community for our own grief – for lost loved ones, and feelings of isolation and insecurity. In sharing her memories of home with us, a space opened in our little community for our own connection to home.

Many of us in DC, many of us here in this congregation, come from somewhere else. DC is a transitory city, where even those who have been here for years can sometimes struggle to find their place. I’ll admit that, as I prepare to move for the 8th time in 5 years, some days I have a hard time imagining fighting for any home as hard as Allison has fought for her mother’s home. People of my own race, education level, generation, and class background have not seemed to put a high value on maintaining a sense of place.

But some days, I yearn for what Allison has.

I think all of us yearn for “home.” We want some place where we know we belong; a place where we know the contours of the cracks in the ceiling and the stair that squeaks, and the way the stone holds the warmth of the afternoon sun into the early evening. Some of us have that home now, and yes, we would fight for it after a devastating flood.

If that home is only a memory, or even if it only exists in imagination, we feel the pain of its absence.

We humans need a place where we belong. We need familiarity with its imperfections and we need to know the simple joy of its comforts.

In a blog post that never quite made it up onto the All Souls webpage during the New Orleans trip, Jordana wrote:

“Through the splintering wood frame I look into what was once her mother’s space of rest. I imagine how over the years Allison must have walked in there and smelled her mother and heard her mother and sought advice from her mother when she needed help. I imagine how after her mother passed away this place, this room, could sometimes hold her like a mother might.”⁴

This room could sometimes hold her like a mother might.

The *home’s* embrace.

This is why our work in New Orleans matters so very much. This is why All Souls returns year after year for service trips. This is why there is a meeting after the service to figure out next steps in our work of supporting families trying to return home. It is not simply that there is an injustice that needs to be righted – an imbalanced resource distribution equation that should be righted. Of course, there *is* great injustice there, and we should play a role in fixing it.

But the work is deeper than that. Our work in New Orleans is about the embrace of home. It is about being of use to a people rebuilding the city that has embraced them for generations. It is about being of use to a people trying to return home to the contours and comforts of the place they belong. It is about being of use to them, and it is also about us.

Whether or not we can still feel the embrace of a beloved parent, whether or not we can still feel the embrace of a home dressed in comfort:

In community, we can find the embrace of belonging.

Even if we are without home, even if we have lost those we love, we may lean into the arms of our communities. We may lean into the arms of this community.

In Allison’s grief, Jordana met her own grief. In Jordana’s grief, I met mine. When we see each other in all our vulnerability and realness, when we love each other there, we create embracing community.

In a few days spent between some volunteers from a congregation in DC and a deeply rooted New Orleans family, for a moment, we each found the embrace of home.

When I called Allison on Friday as I prepared this sermon, she said “by the way, how is that girl doing who lost her mother? I think about her sometimes.” “She’s good.” I said. “She’s getting ready to go to college – I think she got into her top choice.” “Wow! That’s just wonderful.” She said.

Trauma runs deeper than logic. But so does love.

Amen.

⁴ From Jordana’s unpublished blog post: Allison’s House