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Sustainable Communities

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At an Upstate New York American Planning Association conference session this past September, speakers were asked how 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina will affect planning practice? I left unsure of the answers. As I reflected on the question I looked back at difficult events that shaped me.

When I was seven, my family was involved in an automobile accident in which I nearly lost my life. While mending in hospital, my father visited me. He was in a wheel chair recovering from polio. He told me my mother did not survive her injuries. Who was going to take care of us, I asked? There was no answer.

When I emerged from hospital, grandmother took me and my siblings into her home. Years later my father returned from rehabilitation and together we re-established our family while he pursued a career in business. We moved on as he prospered.

Life is a journey. Time past and our family survived both illness and accident but it was a complicated time. We couldn't undo what happened although the memory of happier times inspired our choices. We were vulnerable. What worked at one time didn't always work latter and at times, decisions that were once appropriate became an impediment to doing what needed to be done as circumstances changed, and change they did.

Kevin Lynch once said all planning comes down to the management of change. But events like 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina are unimaginable and force us to change the way we live. Both events were sudden, unexpected, devastating in scope and very immediate to us in North America. In much of the rest of the world, such events are more commonplace, and often more devastating.

"The most famous picture nobody's ever seen" is how Associated Press photographer Richard Drew described his photo of an unidentified man jumping to his death from the twin towers. Newspaper editors felt the image too violently graphic for viewers and refused to print it at the time. The image bridges an emotional gap between victim and audience, making the horror personal, and unmanageable—and forcing us to grapple with the 9/11 and its aftermath.

David Brinkley's book "The Great Deluge", recounts Hurricane Katrina's encounter with New Orleans and provides intimate experiences of residents and first responders. Katrina, like 9/11 became personal, devastating, and un-escapable. Brinkley categorizes the collective experience of the people in Mississippi and Louisiana into four sequential stages during the storm and in the days thereafter.

The first stage involved experiencing the storm's fury and magnitude. Many of those who remained in New Orleans felt they could weather the blast as in previous storms or were unable to leave because of the lack of automobiles, other resources, or reduced mobility. The second stage focused on the collapse of the levees and flooding of the City after the storm passed. Many residents emerged from shelters feeling elated they escaped the storm's wrath only to face rapidly rising flood waters from collapsing levees.

The third stage recounts the break down of social order as residents waiting for rescue on roof tops and collection areas (e.g., the Convention Center and Superdome) witnessed vandalism and women, children and the poor were subjected to predation and senseless violence. The fourth stage involved the unleashing of disease and natural hazards as flood waters mixed with a toxic brew of sewage and chemicals, snakes and insects.

To the author's four stages, I add a fifth. At the highest point, New Orleans is less than 10 feet above sea level. It is situated in a bowl between Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River and is below sea level. Vulnerable to inundation from the river which has been drastically altered and flood surge from the Gulf of Mexico, resulting from the damaged of delta ecosystem and coastal wetlands, the City is susceptible (and increasingly more so) to the increased storm intensity and frequency and rising levels of the oceans that climate change has wrought.

James Hanson, lead author of a study on climate change and head of the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Goddard Institute for Space Studies says "if further global warming reached two or three degrees Celsius, we will likely see changes that make the Earth a very different planet from the one we know". "The last time it was that warm was in the middle Pliocene, about three million years ago, when the sea levels were estimated to have been 25 meters (80 ft) higher than today." Edward Wilson, the biologist, believes that roughly ¼ of all plant and animal species will become extinct by 2050, in part due to climate change. How do we plan for such events?

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of the Church of England, was in the vicinity of the twin towers on September 11, 2001. The next day, he presented a homily at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on Morningside Heights. His plea was for silence. Words spoken immediately won't last. Silence is essential to finding the words which could express the shock and loss and to allow the demons of the moment to walk away.

A planned response to catastrophic events such as 9/11, Hurricane Katrina and to the unfolding changes we will experience resulting from climate change should involve: times of silence, reflection and story telling to remember who we are and to understand what has transpired; an ambiguous phase for grief, anger and letting go of the past before a clear sense of what the future holds is evident; and a time for re-imagining and collective design responding to the changed landscape we face while rebuilding our communities. Our journey forward towards a sustainable community demands this.

Regards,

George McKibbin

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