

The New Orleans Dispatches

by R. Nicholas Gerlich

Dispatch #1: How Are You?

12 April 2006

I have a confession to make. I like to travel alone.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not some hermit looking to withdraw from society. I just enjoy the solitude and the opportunity to think, to reflect, and to hear my inner voice.

So when I get that rare chance to fly alone, I always make sure I stop at the newsstand before boarding my plane. Airport Books are my favorite category of reading. Nothing beats picking up a challenging tome that I can begin to pick apart on the next leg of my trip.

Today I had 90 minutes to kill at Love Field. I had just bid adieu to an old friend, the wife of a guy with whom I once played music. I dove right into the newsstand, and was immediately attracted to *The Weather Makers*, by Tim Flannery. Being a Weather Channel junkie, this one seemed like a perfect fit.

As the captain climbed to 30,000 feet, I started plowing through Flannery's views on global warming, and how humans are partially to blame for creating much of the weather that is wreaking havoc around the globe. Glaciers receding. Rainfall patterns changing. Record heat.

And the worst hurricanes in recorded weather history.

Eyebrows raised, I figured this book was certainly *a propos* for a trip to New Orleans. After all, Hurricane Katrina had been the television centerpiece for many weeks last summer. I had no idea what to expect some 8 1/2 months after the impact, but I had been warned to brace myself for Third World conditions.

Evidence of wind damage greeted me upon my arrival at Louis Armstrong International Airport. The telltale blue-tarp roofs so common in Florida the past couple of years were common. Store signs were still missing. Some buildings were abandoned or wrapped in sheet plastic.

And I wasn't even near the real damage.

I checked into my hotel, grumbling about the high room rate and the price of a rental car. "If these people want folks to come back to their town, they need to quit gouging us," I mumbled to myself.

I assembled my [Bike Friday](#) travel bike, and drove over to the Mississippi River levee bike path. I hit the trail for 40 miles, surveying the post-Katrina landscape. Since the river is actually higher than most of New Orleans, the only damage I saw was wind-related, with many blue tarps left behind to cover the evidence.

Following a quick transition through the shower, I headed out for dinner. And it was then I began seeing the effects of Katrina. Suddenly I felt like I was in an RV park. There were countless FEMA trailers parked in front of damaged homes, people living as if New Orleans had turned into an enormous campground. Actually, this was the suburb of Metairie. The impact here was minimal compared to what I'll see later this week.

The RV industry was "blessed" last year by Katrina. FEMA ordered thousands of nondescript 27' travel trailers for short-term housing. Our incoming university president has one in his front yard here, in fact. Supported by stacks of cement blocks, these trailers look as if they had been dropped by helicopters onto driveways and front yards.

I spied a Chevy's FreshMex restaurant and headed in. A banner proclaimed, "We're Now Open." The Lone Star steakhouse next door was shuttered, as was much of the once-elegant shopping mall behind. It was almost eery to see an abandoned Macy's, but I sensed I was beginning to experience the "new" New Orleans.

The only available seat was in the bar, so I grabbed a stool and started to sort through more of Flannery's

arguments. The culprit is CO₂, or carbon dioxide, which is emitted by burning fossil fuels. Planet Earth's ability to absorb carbon dioxide is less than our ability to produce it. The result: Global warming.

A laminated page sat on my table containing a few menu items. "Can I see a full menu, please?" I asked my waitress.

"We've only been open four weeks. That's it."

"You're kidding," I deadpanned.

"This is all we can do right now."

"You're kidding," my echo chamber repeated. But after a little negotiation we were able to settle on an off-menu item anyway. "What kind of beer do you have?"

She proceeded to list all the brands that fell off the Bud truck. So much for getting the local Abita Ale. I settled for a Dos Equis Amber.

Flannery says that we are reaching a "global climatic tipping point." One in five living things are "committed to extinction" if the levels of greenhouse gases remain constant the next few decades.

And the weather is just going to get worse.

My ad-hoc veggie quesadillas were delicious, even if the weather forecast was grim. "Would you like another beer?" my waitress asked.

"Yeah, sure. What the hell." If I might be among the 20% headed for extinction, I may as well enjoy myself.

I then struck up a conversation with the bartender. "What kind of damage did you have here?"

"Mostly water damage from broken windows and through the roof," he replied. "Our air conditioning units were ripped right off the top."

"Was there any flooding out here?"

"Yeah, but it depended on where you were in relation to the canals. Plus, there was a tornado out here, and trees were ripped out of the ground and dropped on houses. Some of these houses will have to be destroyed, while others might be repaired."

"The airport was under water," he continued. "The runway was a big lake. Be sure to check for the water line on the sound barrier walls on I-10. They're 10 feet high. And by the cemetery on the right, the water was 25 feet deep."

My quesadillas began doing somersaults as he went on and on. While this side of town looked bad, apparently it was a case of "you ain't seen nothing yet."

"We're making it, though. I hear that Target is going to move into the old Macy's store. And they might put a theater in. We need a good theater on this side of town. But it might all take a couple of years. We're gonna make it."

I headed back to my hotel, hitting the Seek button on the radio. The old Nazareth hit, "Hair of the Dog," blared its chorus: "Now you're messing with a sonofabi****" I wondered if maybe this was New Orleans' reply after Katrina. "You can knock us down, but we're gonna make it. Mother Nature may have beaten the hell out of us, but we've still got a little fight left inside."

Strolling through the lobby I saw a woman seated at a table. Eyes fixated on a portable DVD player, she was watching God-knows-what and singing along with the soundtrack at the top of her lungs. Catching my eye, she smiled and immediately stopped.

"How ya doin?" she asked, with a grin as wide as the Mississippi.

"Fine, thanks. How are you?"

In a funny way, though, I think I was really asking, "How are you, New Orleans?"

And I think I'm beginning to hear that inner voice telling me the answer.

Dr "I Really Haven't Seen Anything Yet" Gerlich

New Orleans Dispatch #2: Safe Mode

13 April 2006

There's a way to trick your Windows operating system into "kinda working" when you're having a problem. When rebooting your machine, hit F8 and Windows will load in this special troubleshooting mode. It has limited usefulness, but at the same time, allows you to check the pulse of the system.

In a strange kind of way, I feel like New Orleans is running on Safe Mode. They hit F8 during the middle of Katrina, and since that time they've been limping along.

The magnitude of the situation hit home while I was headed out today. The elevator stopped on the second floor, and two workers got on, both laden with bags of trash. Apparently in mid-conversation, one, an older white woman with teeth missing, said to a younger black man:

"My daughter and my two grandchildren live with me in the trailer." I detected a slight cracking in her voice as she said it, almost as if she were near tears.

The black man responded after a pregnant pause, "Yeah, it's tough out there."

The other elevator occupant and I stood there in silence, not knowing what to say. There we were, temporary residents at a posh hotel with nary a concern in the world other than where we were going to eat lunch. And three generations of this woman's family were living huddled up inside a short FEMA trailer.

I made sure to note the water marks on the sound barrier walls along I-10. The bartender was right. There was a faint line of green muck about 10 feet off the ground. In all my years living in Chicago, I never saw snowdrifts that deep. I can only imagine what it is like when your city has turned into an extension of the Gulf of Mexico.

And the Superdome looks much like it did nearly 9 months ago. A huge banner proudly proclaims the homecoming of the New Orleans Saints on 24 September. Those guys are really going to have to hustle to get that arena ready in five months.

High rise buildings with plywood window coverings dot the downtown landscape. The World Trade Center across the street from our Hilton digs looks like it has been through a war. And the mounds of trash all over the area look like trash day has come and gone a few dozen times.

I drove around town a little this morning with my camera, surreptitiously taking shots through my lowered window. But I had to quit. I felt like a voyeur, a freak glorying in someone else's misfortune. I said a prayer and got the hell out of there.

Billboards throughout town say in large bold-face letters that "We're Open Now," or "We're Home," or other such positive messages. Perhaps these were more a rallying cry to the remnant, for New Orleans still looks like it has a long way to go. Maybe they just needed to remind themselves that, even though nearly nine months have passed, they're making it.

Kind of.

Nine months. That's a long time. A human embryo takes roughly nine months of gestation before being born.

New Orleans, though, doesn't look like a bouncing bundle of joy reflective of mankind's reproductive instincts. No, it looks like it has been through hell. And the people look tired.

But the spirit of New Orleans is indefatigable. At lunch today, the server was upbeat in giving my dining companions the ten-cent tour of the brewer's art over at Gordon Biersch. Earlier, over breakfast at Denny's, the 50-something waitress told me to be sure to ask for her the next time I'm in. And the clerk at the Shell station thought my choice of the new berries-and-Creme Dr. Pepper "sure looked interesting."

And not a soul dared complain about the plight they all share. New Orleans looks like a war zone. Yet life goes on, and just like the film clips we see from Baghdad, people are driving around, going to work, and living their lives in spite of it all.

Tomorrow I am planning to hook up with a local friend who is going to give me a bicycle Tour de Katrina. My batteries are charged, and my Memory Stick is nearly empty. I need to see the bottom of Lake New Orleans. I hope I have the mental energy for all of it, along with the desire to keep clicking the shutter. I keep telling myself that this has historical value, as if that would somehow erase the horribly boorish behavior of photographing someone else's tragedy.

I can't help but hear the Elevator Woman's voice as she shared her woes with a companion. But I also can't help but see the significance of what they were doing at the same time. Burdened by bulging heavy plastic bags, they were headed to the dumpster with a bunch of trash. Junk. Stuff that no one needs.

And in a strange kind of way, I feel that, in baring her soul with her partner, she was getting rid of the junk that was weighing her down, too. Junk like living cramped up in a FEMA trailer, knowing that a steamy summer is right around the corner. And that it might still be a long time until things get better.

When there's trouble with the operating system, the peripherals aren't working correctly, and nothing seems to work right, Safe Mode may be as good as it gets. But it sure beats the alternative.

Limping trumps running when all you have is the shirt on your back.

Dr "I Promise To Not Be Judgmental Again" Gerlich

New Orleans Dispatch #3:Flood **14 April 2006**

"I've lived in New Orleans for a long time, and I was always told that you should keep an axe in the attic."

My friend, Pat, gave me a once-in-a-lifetime personal guided tour of New Orleans today. For 44 miles we drove around town, roughly 90% of it being destroyed. It's an area about the size of Amarillo.

And were it not for the Louisiana license plates I would swear I was in a war zone.

"The water lines on these houses are six feet above the ground," Pat said as we drove along Canal Street. "The prisoners at the County Jail all had to be moved. My children's school was closed for weeks."

Piles of rubbish lined the street. Most businesses and homes were abandoned, save for a few where people were living on the second floor only and had a FEMA trailer out front.

I had charged my camera batteries and cleared my Memory Stick in anticipation of this tour. My shutter finger got a workout as I aimed and shot every few seconds it seemed.

And then we headed toward the 17th Street Canal. "This is where the levee breached. There was a 25-foot wall of water, and anything in its way just got bowled over. My sister lives 5 miles from here, and it only took 20 minutes for the water to be 9 feet deep."

My brain was doing quick calculations. Five miles. Twenty minutes. Nine feet deep. I think we have a word for that: tsunami.

"Many people were caught off guard by the speed of the water. Unable to escape their own homes, they climbed up into their attics. But as the water kept rising, they had to figure a way out through the roof."

That's where the axe comes in handy, I finally figured out. "I've seen houses with a hole in the roof where people literally broke out of their own homes, an act of final desperation."

Houses were lifted off their foundations and moved down the street. Cars were rolled like bowling balls. Trees were uprooted and tossed about like toothpicks. And there was dried silt everywhere.

Pat went on and on with his monologue. My jaw hung low as I tried to comprehend the situation. I uttered a few epithets, the only thing I could think to say. I've never before seen such devastation. I've been to tornado sites before, and while the tragedy there is huge, it is usually confined to a narrow path.

But this was widespread. It was over 75% of New Orleans. "The peak wind recorded here was about 140 mph," Pat continued. If the water didn't get you, then the wind would.

US Army Corps of Engineer workers were busy rebuilding the levee, this time reinforcing it that way it probably should have been built in the first place. Complete neighborhoods were ghost towns. We couldn't even find a Coke.

I've only seen pictures of Hiroshima, but I suspect it must have been a lot like New Orleans (save for the atomic part). It was as if we had just dropped in to a city that, in an instant, went from vibrant and alive to deserted and dead.

My camera batteries started to wear down as I clicked away. As an amateur photographer, my mantra has always been, "Shoot a lot of pictures, and you're bound to get a few good ones." I was hoping for the best, aiming and shooting wildly as Pat navigated the battlefield.

We had to drive around a house that was halfway in the street. We dodged fallen trees, massive piles of household rubble, and potholes big enough to sink his Toyota.

Moldy green lines on the buildings bore testimony to how high the water reached. But with the force it entered the area, depth was almost a moot point. There was such force that little could stand a chance of remaining anchored to its moorings.

And the longer we drove around, the more I realized I was coming unanchored from mine.

Dr "Point and Click" Gerlich

New Orleans Dispatch #4: The Deep

15 April 2006

"You see those houses over there? What's different about them?" Pat asked.

Hmmm. I really didn't know. For the last three hours all I had seen were totally trashed buildings. Walls that had fallen as the structure caved in. Houses lifted from their foundations. Enormous uprooted trees poking through into living rooms.

And Pat wanted to know what made these any different?

"Look. There's no water lines on these houses. They were completely covered with water."

Gulp. Try as I might, I couldn't spot one single water line. The roof apexes were a good 15 feet off the ground, if not more.

My stomach was turning. The smell of mold was thick in the air. It was like rummaging around in your grandmother's musty old basement, except that the smell was everywhere. You couldn't escape it.

This was the "bottom" of Lake New Orleans. The Chalmette, Arabi, and Lower 9th Ward communities were totally devastated. The city's poorest residents lived in the 9th Ward, and in many cases, the houses were rental properties. This meant that the residents could not get a FEMA trailer because they did not own their home. With nothing left, they had nowhere to go.

We swigged the last few drops of the Coke we had finally found after 2 1/2 hours of driving around. Stores are virtually non-existent in these parts of town. The best way to experience this neighborhood was on foot, so we parked the car.

"New Orleans has lost almost all of its economy," Pat continued. "It's kind of a chicken-and-egg thing. There are no stores because the owners left. There are no workers, no customers, no tourists. The workers can't come back to these parts of town because there are no jobs. The tourists won't come because there are no stores or anything."

What a vicious cycle, I thought. Ironically, other parts of New Orleans (notably the French Quarter) are littered with "Now Hiring" signs in front of the businesses that were spared. There is a huge labor shortage, and Wendy's and McDonald's are reportedly paying \$10 per hour for burger flippers. "Wendy's is even paying \$125 bonus each week just for staying," Pat remarked.

But that was all moot in the 9th Ward. Countless houses were now parked in the middle of streets. Abandoned cars were as common as daffodils in spring. And in one two-block section all we saw were foundations, the houses nowhere to be seen.

It was in the 9th Ward that we saw various relief agencies at work trying to make sense of it all. Everyone from church groups to anti-war factions were busy doing something, although it didn't appear that anyone had yet to put a dent in the destruction.

Each pile of rubbish was a final monument to someone's possessions. There among the sheetrock and furniture were children's toys, clothing, kitchen appliances, bicycles, and TVs. And the more I looked at those possessions, the more I thought how utterly useless they all are in times of tragedy. Assuming the owners got out with their lives, all the material goods in the world won't help when there's a wall of water bearing down on you.

I wondered out loud what it must have been like trying make a frantic departure. Do you try to grab a few things? Or do you just flee with the shirt on your back? It's kind of like dying to self in a way...you leave the old man behind, because all of his things don't amount to anything where you're headed next.

Pat nudged me back to reality, pointing out where a huge barge had come to rest among houses. Washed inland from the nearby Industrial Canal, the barge was merely doing what it does best: float. Except that barges seldom come into contact with houses.

It was in the 9th Ward that I sensed the highest degrees of frustration among the former residents. Spray-painted graffiti took jabs at Mayor Nagin, Governor Blanco, and FEMA. Perhaps it was therapeutic to release those pent-up emotions by turning dislodged houses into billboards of despair.

The night before, while strolling Bourbon Street, I saw numerous t-shirts with Katrina-related slogans silk-screened across the front. Perhaps the most poignant was the one proclaiming New Orleans to be "Baghdad on the Bayou," for that's what it looked like.

While the hurricane's damages were not a respecter of economic privilege (it was an equal-opportunity hurricane, you could say), I found it interesting to see the majority of federal work being done in the wealthier areas. While the 9th Ward was being attended to by volunteer groups, it was along the 17th Street and London Avenue Canal areas that the heavy machinery was rolling. There, new reinforced steel walls were being installed, with wider dikes to help retain the water. But along the Industrial Canal in the 9th Ward, the silty remains of a community lay quietly.

Four hours and 44 miles later, Pat had me back at my hotel. It had been a trip to hell and back. And while westerners envision hell to be a place of eternal flames, I can't help but think that in The Big Easy hell now bears

a resemblance to water.

The Avis shuttle bus driver this morning made small talk as he took me to the terminal. "So what brought you to New Orleans, sir?"

I explained about my conference, and that I had toured the impact areas. "It was more than I ever imagined," I added. "The TV just didn't do it justice."

"I'm beyond all that now," he said. "We've got to put it behind us. I can sit here and cry about it, but that's not going to get me to tomorrow."

And so I entered the airport, once again travelling alone. I glanced across the terminal, surprised at the lack of people on a holiday weekend. Amazed that three-fourths of the shops and eateries were still closed. Stunned at what I had just seen the previous three days.

I opened *The Weather Makers* and prepared to read until my flight boarded, but stopped short. I suddenly realized that I wasn't alone after all, for I had taken a little bit of New Orleans with me. It was musty. It was ripped apart at the seams. It was shaken from its very foundation. But I took a piece of it with me nonetheless.

And with that I closed my eyes and prayed.

Dr "Seeing Is Believing" Gerlich

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