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Writing the Blues: Teaching in a Post-Katrina Environment

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• The writing I received in my first-semester composition class
• at Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana, the semester
• immediately following Hurricane Katrina was stunning
• with respect to both student commitment and narrative
• sophistication. In this essay, I analyze a representative
• example of this writing entitled "Life During Katrina" by a
• student I have called "K." The student's essay developed a
• thesis, documented a chronology, increasingly included detail,
• naturally included dialogue, and reached a sensitive and
• sincerely reflective conclusion. Moreover, the student (like my
• other students in that class) was extraordinarily committed to
• revision, working diligently on issues of both grammar and
• clarity. My own conclusion to the remarkable post-Katrina
• student writing I experienced is that our teaching of Freshman
• Composition can be much more artificial than we really
• desire it to be. How to make first-year writing courses more
• meaningful to students is an imperative that I believe we must
• continue to explore.

It's strange sometimes how a phrase lingers in the mind and will not go away. As I drove toward Chalmette, Louisiana, for the first time, just five months after Hurricane Katrina, my mind could not wrap itself around the many thoughts that overwhelmed it. I wanted to turn back and go anywhere—anywhere but here. But I kept hearing this haunting phrase. It was not the first time I had heard it. It had been

there, hidden among all the thoughts and memories and hurts and pains. Just as I have done with most of the terrible things that have happened in my life, I placed it on a shelf in a back closet of my mind and tried to close the door. But every time I heard news about New Orleans, Nunez, and Chalmette or talked to one of my friends or colleagues in some other place, in some other time, the door opened, and there it was again: "Oh where, oh where have all my students gone? Oh where, oh where can they be?"

To calm the racing beat of my heart and the increasing pounding of imaginary waves in my mind as I drove across the Twin Span, I started repeating phrases and clichés I knew that related to water. I was amazed at how many I remembered.

- Fish out of water
- Blood is thicker than water
- Don't throw the baby out with the bath water
- Gone water does not mill anymore
- He is wet behind the ears
- In deep water
- It leaks water everywhere
- Plenty of water ran under bridges
- That is water under the bridge
- To have water up to the throat
- To drown in a glass of water
- You're a sitting duck
- You're in hot water
- You trouble the water
- Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink

I knew the location of one of my students. I was devastated when I received the news that she had drowned. I remember so vividly the last time we spoke. It was the Friday before the storm. We were preparing to leave campus and rehashing the first week of school. She had been in

several of my classes and struggled very hard to keep up with courses and work full-time in the maintenance department. I was very proud of her determination and dedication to her job and to her studies. That Friday as we discussed the first week of school and contemplated if we were going to have to evacuate for the storm, I turned to her and said, "We can't sweat the small stuff; life is too short." I remember waving to her as I drove from the parking lot. That was the last time I saw her.

That first morning as I parked my new Honda (the old one now had a tree growing out of it) in the same parking space where I had last waved to Liz, I felt like a long lost child returning home after years of exile. I was glad to be home, but I was still besieged with fear. I dreaded hearing the stories that I knew were waiting to be told. We had been scattered all over the country and the repercussions were enormous. I had faced so many obstacles in my own journeys, but I was especially concerned about my students. I hoped some were starting better lives; I figured some were struggling to survive; I knew some were dead.

I wasn't quite sure why I had returned, what I was going to see, or even what I hoped to offer. But I felt deep inside that I needed to be here. Maybe I needed to face my own demons. I felt as if I had heard Creole speaking to Sonny in James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues." "He wanted Sonny to leave the shoreline and strike out for the deep water. He was Sonny's witness that deep water and drowning were not the same thing—he had been there, and he knew. And he wanted Sonny to know" (47).

And I wanted—no needed—to know. Prior to Hurricane Katrina, I had lived on the beachfront in Long Beach, Mississippi. Returning home to emptiness, mile after mile of emptiness, I knew what the blues were all about. I knew because I had been there: family members missing, lost home, no home, displaced, misplaced. Everything gone! I was alive and managing, but maybe I had to prove to myself that I was a survivor,

that I could forge a new life, that I could find, as Sonny did, “right there beneath my fingers, a damn brand-new piano” (Baldwin 47), a brand-new life.

Thus, I began my first semester back at Nunez Community College. Hurricane Katrina had completely devastated the area of Chalmette. Not one house or building had been spared. Everywhere I looked, I saw despair, defeat, and hopelessness. The buildings, the streets, the trees, and even the earth were scarred, and each of us bore those scars. Some were visible; some were hidden, but they were there nevertheless.

Most of the facilities at Nunez had been damaged by the storm. The faculty and staff were all squeezed together on two floors in the Arts and Science Building. In this tiny area, in every available space the faculty taught classes. As I faced my first class, I felt like Laura in her one room school on *Little House on the Prairie*. I was armed with my textbook and a piece of chalk. No computers, no PowerPoint presentation, no smart board. My students didn’t seem to notice.

As students entered the classroom, they asked the same question: “How did you make out?” My answer was always the same, “My family all survived; everything else can be replaced.” Of course, I had to ask them the same question. The answers varied, but actually they were the same. In some way and to some degree, they were all affected.

As I planned my course outlines for all my classes that first post-Katrina semester, I had one general rule: try to stay away from Katrina discussions and present the course as I normally would. That strategy did not work. Inevitably, everything from how to write thesis statements to how to punctuate compound sentences ended with a Katrina story: a student in tears, another lost in a daze after her third funeral in one week, another lamenting the horrors of gutting the family home and finding a dead family member, numerous accounts of dealing

with insurance companies and FEMA, living with relatives, and living in a FEMA travel trailer.

Finally, I conceded defeat. Katrina had won, again! I had to find a way to incorporate the emotional trauma we were all dealing with and still teach composition. I am still amazed at the determination of my students. Considering all the problems, I am not sure how they made it to class. It occurred to me that they were using the class and school as a coping mechanism, just as I was. It was normal, and that is what we all needed— something to remind us that the world was still in motion, that life continued.



Photo Credit: Patty Steib

So, I varied my routine. At the beginning of each class, I allowed my students to talk. Students were encouraged to discuss any topic they wished, as long as it was relevant to the storm, to recovery, or to coping with daily life, or school. After the discussion students had to write a response based upon an agreed topic.

When I began teaching my classes, I did not know that Hurricane Katrina and I would become collaborators. In fact, she was probably the lead instructor. Everything I taught that semester was somehow

funneled through the "eye of Katrina." I did not have to teach my students how to be observant, or how to develop tone, style or voice. Katrina had taught them this. I usually spend several classes working on development using sensory details. Hurricane Katrina had taught them more about sensory experiences than I could ever hope. Unknowingly, Hurricane Katrina and I had given them permission to speak; we had given them a voice.

As the class continued, I was amazed at the progress most of the students made. In the beginning, most of the discussions were somber, but we dredged onward. We discovered that most of us were living in FEMA travel trailers or some other less-than-desirable living arrangement that was not conducive for studying. I quickly discovered that being a FEMA trailer resident dulled the senses and caused many negative emotions. I needed space, and space I didn't have. I found it difficult to work or even concentrate in my sardine can. Some of my students had small or teenage children confined in that small space. Many of us became paranoid. Strange thoughts crowded the mind and blocked the oxygen needed to think clearly. "There is not enough air; too many toxins are in the air; it's going to blow up if I turn the propane gas on; there is not enough space to cook, to eat, to bathe; it's just too damn small."

After listening, agreeing, and understanding my students' problems, we all decided that we would come to class as early as possible to complete homework. We all began spending as much time as possible at school. We became the FEMA Trailer Rat Pack (I'll forego our rats, snakes, and other critter stories for another day). In the process, the students bonded with each other and with me. We studied together, we shared helpful ideas, we shared storm-related information, and in a way we became an extended family. One day as I sat waiting for students to enter the classroom, I noticed an amazing change. Instead of the dazed looks, the frowns, the despair, I saw smiles; I heard laughter. It was just incredible to me that our open discussions and meetings together for a

few extra minutes had transformed from a lament to laughter. Instead of sadness or anger, we began to find humor in some of the insanity that was going on around us and directly affecting our lives. Insurance adjusters and FEMA became our favorite sources of amusement when we needed a good chuckle, a form of comic relief. After laughing at the absurdities, it was easier to deal with run-on sentences, verb tenses, or developing a main idea.

As I reflect on the first semester post-Katrina, it was exhausting, emotionally and physically. I faced and still face the uncertainty of my future in New Orleans, at Nunez, or on the Gulf Coast. But through it all, the first semester taught me many things about my students, and—more importantly—about myself.

Most of my students survived the semester. I recently saw one of my English 1020 students as I sat eating lunch at a local restaurant in Slidell. She is now living in New York and attending a prestigious university, majoring in communication. She thanked me for giving her the confidence to pursue her dreams. Not all my students managed as well. I feel somehow responsible for those who dropped out, or disappeared, or gave up. They were only a few. I feel I failed them somehow, but even those students taught me something: sometimes we have no choices; sometime we don't have control; I don't have all the answers; and hard work does not always guarantee success.

I thought I was strong, that I could survive almost anything. Katrina taught me differently. She taught me that I was human, that sometimes even I must concede defeat, at least to some degree. My old approach to teaching did not work in that first post-Katrina semester. I had to realize that once a new plot is set into action by a catalyst, it must play itself out. And as a result of that catalyst, a new norm is set. The old one may exist in our memories, but life will never be or can never be the same. I had to throw out my normal procedures and establish

something completely different. And that was a good thing. Hurricane Katrina forced me to become a better teacher.

Today, I am more flexible in my classes and changing the course syllabus to accommodate the different needs of my students is not such a big adjustment. I have always known that a strong foundation is one of the fundamental keys to learning. Katrina forced me to acknowledge that fact again. Sometimes I have to go backward and reinforce the foundation before I can make progress. Many of my students need this, and now it makes more sense than it did before. Katrina washed away anything and everything that did not have a strong foundation, from homes to relationships.

Now, almost two years later, I am still teaching at Nunez Community College. We made it through the first post-Katrina hurricane season without having to evacuate and without much worry, although the fear of another hurricane is always lurking in the back recesses of our minds. I keep a bag packed and all my personal papers in my car. We will never be as cavalier about hurricanes or leaving as we once were, for we all know that "it can come again; it can come again" (Baldwin 45).

Works Cited

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Student Essays

Kathleen Atatalo

Hurricane Katrina was a devastating time for anyone who lived in Louisiana, Mississippi, or anywhere along the Gulf Coast. People spent the next few months to a year moving around, trying to find a place that felt like home, and where they felt that they might belong. Most people simply wanted to go home, but home, as well as everything people had ever worked hard for, was gone. Hurricane Katrina was a very sad, emotional, and confusing time for everyone.

It was Saturday night, in the middle of the night, when my family and I heard on the news that there was no high or low that would direct Hurricane Katrina in another direction. I panicked; for the first time in my life, I wanted to evacuate. My mother and I cleared her Subaru of anything we would not need. It also had an oil leak and no brakes. In addition to the Prelude, which I had borrowed from my boyfriend, neither one of us were sure how far either car would get us. We packed clothes just for a couple of days and enough food for about a week. We then loaded up each car until there was no more room for anything but my younger siblings, their father, their grandfather, and ourselves. We got as far as Tulane when the Subaru's exhaust started to smoke; the smoke was so thick and dark that I couldn't see the car in front of me. We pulled over long enough to figure out if we were going to continue to drive or go to a shelter; we continued to drive.

We made it to St. Francis Ville, which is outside of Baton Rouge, when the Subaru broke down. My mother and I drove down the road for a little ways until we came to a campground; we rented a site and forced the car to make it to the site. Afterwards we asked around for the closest Wal-Mart or any store that would have tents and the closest place was an hour away. We unpacked the Prelude and everybody piled in; it wasn't until we got to Wal-Mart that we found out that the waters of Katrina had broken the levels and the city of New Orleans was beginning to fill with water. My mother as well as my younger siblings

started to cry; they cried because our home and everything that my mother had worked hard for was gone; we didn't know where anyone was or if they were doing fine; and we had no way of contacting any friends. We stayed at the campground for a couple of days and then the managers wanted everyone who didn't have an RV to pack up and leave the site. We did as they said, but weren't sure of where we could go, considering the car didn't want to budge, but my mother was able to get the car to start and it made it this time to Natchez, Mississippi.

The poor old Subaru finally broke down outside of a bar on the highway; this time the car didn't even start and we were stranded. As we sat to figure out what to do, the owner of the bar brought out cold drinks for all of us and asked if there was anything he could do. We thanked him and told him no. My mother and I left my younger siblings, their father, and grandfather there to find a gas station; when we got to the gas station my mother called my grandmother in Missouri. She explained the car trouble and where we were stranded. My grandmother sent my aunt and uncle out in two cars to come and get us.

We slept in the cars that night; I had very little sleep because I couldn't stop thinking about home. It really hadn't sunk in yet, so to me it just seemed like a bad dream I couldn't wake up from. We hadn't showered since the campground and we were sitting in the heat waiting on my uncle and my aunt to reach us. It took them 24 hours to get to us because of all the detours off of I-55 South. We packed up the cars and we headed back out, leaving the Subaru behind; we were thankful that the car had made it that far. We made it to Tennessee and decided we couldn't drive any further. We knew that it would be impossible to find one hotel that would have a vacant room, so we pulled into the Drury Inn and spent that night in the parking lot. After a couple of hours of being there we were awakened by a police officer, who had been called by the desk clerk. He asked what we were doing and we explained the whole situation to him; he told us to get our rest and leave in the

morning. We woke up and headed back on I-55 North around 7:00 in the morning; thankfully, the rest of the way there we had no problems.

We reached my grandmother's house, in Bloomfield, Missouri, around 6:00 that evening. We showered and I called my best friend Kim, who lives in Missouri as well. I spent a school year living with my aunt when I was in middle school. She was thrilled to know that I was still alive and out of New Orleans. She came rushing over to pick me up. I spent the next couple of days staying with her when my mother called and said that a couple from one of the churches had donated their farm house, on a gravel road, and that she had the keys to it. I was thrilled that we didn't have to stay with family members. Don't get me wrong. I love my family dearly; it's just all of us couldn't stay under the same roof that long; it would have driven us crazy. We spent the next few months dealing with FEMA, the Red Cross, and any other organization that was helping the victims of Hurricane Katrina. I enrolled at the only community college that we could find in our location. It was an hour away. I attended school there for about a month. When I first started most of my teachers felt that I was lying about being a hurricane evacuee, and that I was just too lazy to start school on time. After about a month of attending school, spending all day trying to find the organization or all day at the organization, I was getting depressed. I had stopped eating and sleeping, until finally I had a nervous breakdown, and withdrew from college. It still amazes me that it took almost a month before it really sunk in that there was no going home; there was nothing to go home to.

We stayed at the farmhouse until the beginning of January. We moved to Dexter, the next town over, because my mother was coming back home to work. There was no work in Missouri and the landlord of the farmhouse didn't feel that I was mature enough to handle a house and two kids. So we found a three bedroom house in town. It didn't have as big of a yard as the farmhouse did, but it had a big enough backyard to play in.

The next four months were hard. I attended school, worked, took care of the house, two kids, doctors' appointments and anything else that needed to get done. My mother would ask me everyday if I was fine and if I was sure I could handle things. I always told her I was fine, that I could handle it, but I couldn't. I was stressed; it was a type of stress that I never felt before. I couldn't sleep or eat; I had lost 20 pounds in just a few weeks. I couldn't ask her to come back because there is hardly any work in Missouri, and if you find a job, it means working your ass off for \$4.25 to \$6.50 an hour, even at McDonald's, and most of the jobs didn't give you more then 25 hours week. I don't know how anybody could live off of that. So I pretended like I was fine and just reminded myself that it was until the end of school, that I only had to do cope until the middle of May.

May finally came around and I was thrilled when school let out. My mother came up to Missouri. We all packed up the house and headed back to Louisiana a few days later. When we made it home I think it was the happiest moment in my life. All I can remember thinking is that I finally could get some good food, hear good music, and enjoy everything about New Orleans. Finally, I was home and home is where I was going to stay.

Although Hurricane Katrina was an emotional time for everyone and I wish that it hadn't happened, it made me realize that here today and gone tomorrow was more than just a saying—it really could happen to anyone in any situation. It also made me appreciate what I have in life because now I know that it can be taken from me. I appreciate the fact that everyone I know and love was able to evacuate and the majority of them are moving back and that my family is okay. We had lost everything but each other. Now because of Hurricane Katrina I appreciate my city and my home more because I can't see myself living anywhere but here. Even though before the storm I couldn't wait until I had the money to move out of the state of Louisiana, now I don't want to go anywhere else to live. So even though the storm did take

everything and we did have to start all over; it made me realize that I need to love and appreciate what I have because it's not going to be here forever.

Courtney Randazza

My experience was emotional. I'm sure everybody's was. My family left our house at 3 a.m. on Sunday. It was a scary thought just knowing that I might not even be coming back to my house. I still had some hope that maybe the hurricane wouldn't come. We stayed at a hotel in Hernando, Mississippi. Some of my relatives were with us so that made it somewhat easier. The next morning when we turned on the news, we found out that Katrina had destroyed everything and all I could think about was that everything I had known my whole life had just been wiped out.

The worse part was not knowing anything. There were still family members and friends out there and we didn't know where they were and we couldn't even get in touch with any of them. I kept thinking about my son and the fact that he didn't have a home. For days all we could do was just sit in the hotel and try to get in contact with people and figure out what we were going to do and where we were going to go. I was still in a bit of denial still thinking that there was possibly something to go back to but eventually I came to realize that my home was gone and now we would basically have to start over from scratch.

After we left the hotel we all stayed in a house in a place called New Roads. I hated it for many reasons. It wasn't home; it was also a small country town with nothing to do so not only was I depressed about the hurricane but now I was dying from boredom. It wasn't much fun sharing a house with about ten people. I love my family but after being stuck in a house in the middle of nowhere, I was ready to start killing everybody. We stayed there for about a month until we decided to settle in Denham Springs and start rebuilding our house in St. Bernard. I was still miserable, but I tried not to complain because at least we were in

a house which was more than what some people had but it was lonely out there with no friends or family around. By then everyone had gone there separate ways.

I did my best to make the most of it. I figured once we got some furniture in the house, it would seem a little bit more like home but I realized it's not home and even though we started getting new things there were stuff that I couldn't replace that bothered me. All of my pictures, little things I've saved over the years, things that I had saved since my son was born were all gone and I wasn't getting them back. My mom would tell me to try and make new memories but it was so hard because it almost meant that I would be starting my life completely over. I am not very big on change and that's probably one of the reasons why I didn't adjust so well in Denham Springs. I also didn't have my car so that meant no school or work for a while which to some people would be almost like a vacation but to a person like me who gets bored very easily, I was starting to get cabin fever.

The holidays especially Christmas were extremely hard. I usually look forward to Christmas time but with everyone and everything gone, it was hard to get in the spirit but I put on my best front because I still had a little boy to think about.

Slowly but surely, things started to get better. The house was coming along. I finally got a new car so I was able to go see my friends on the weekends. It was weird going back to the house after seeing it full of mud and just completely falling apart. All of our stuff had been thrown out and the inside was completely stripped. Looking at the house like that made me think about when we first built the house in 1992. The outside was there but nothing on the inside. We were truly starting over. It was still the same house but it almost felt like I was in a different house. I still think about when I would drive around the parish with my dad and just look at everything that was destroyed. There were so many places that I had a lot of good memories of and they were gone

and I didn't even know if they would be back. I still can't get over how in just one day everyone's lives were completely changed. I would sit there and wish I could turn back time and go back to the way things used to be before Katrina. I wasn't too happy when I found out that some family members weren't coming back and that made me think of how I took all of them for granted because they were always near by so it wasn't a big deal how often I saw them. Now that they are not so close I miss them and wish that they still only lived five minutes away. Even all the hangouts aren't the same. Every weekend all of my friends and I would go to Daiquiris & Company. Now that it's gone and not coming back we started going to Daiquiris Paradise and it's strange because a lot of the same faces are there but the feeling is just not the same. In the afternoons I would go sit by someone's house and hang out and talk. Now I have to go sit in a FEMA trailer which doesn't exactly have that welcome feeling to it and if someone does have a house I have to drive thirty to forty minutes or maybe an hour to get there and I can only do that on the weekends if I have the time.

Last week I finally went to the cemetery to see my paw-paw who died three years ago and from that time I could never get it together to go see him after the funeral. I just couldn't accept the fact that he was gone but I decided to go. I sat there and talked about all the frustrations over the past year and even though he did not answer me back it felt good to talk to someone who wouldn't give the same old answers. Every day gets better. I'm glad to be home and see a lot of familiar faces. Most of all, I'm glad I'm in my house, the place where I grew up, the only place I really know.

