

The Moral Crisis of Hurricane Katrina

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Debates about the aftermath of hurricane Katrina may be most striking for the ideas that are largely missing from them: a language and symbolism of moral values. Katrina exposed a lack of concern among many political leaders for the values they could have articulated in her wake, including compassion, love, and a need to respect human dignity. While individual Americans have embraced these ideas in their reactions to the crisis, our leaders have fallen far short of them. They seem not to understand that values like compassion could help us face many of the challenges facing our country.

Where did moral values go this September? President Bush has been widely criticized for his lack of public compassion early in the crisis, when he seemed reluctant to end his vacation. He has since expressed more cogently his concern for the hurricane victims, and he has even recognized that socioeconomic inequalities contributed to the storm's consequences.

Still, like most other elected officials, President Bush has not evoked the "moral values" rhetoric he so forcefully used in the past. In fact, it is completely missing from how he has framed post-Katrina policy.

Should we be surprised by this? Given the history of race, religion, and moral values in the United States, perhaps not. Historically, treating African Americans—the majority of those affected most dramatically by the hurricane—as lacking basic worth and dignity has been justified for some by the values of our democracy and dominant religions. Early in our history, political and religious leaders justified slavery by arguing that Blacks were not capable of rationality and behaving morally—that they were not human.

It took us a century to expunge these ideas officially from our Constitution, but they are still evident in how we talk about poverty today, blaming it on immoral behavior. Just think about how many of our political leaders talk about poverty among single mothers: as an issue of making bad moral choices, rather than facing bad economic ones. In the wake of Katrina, what else can justify how we treated African American families, first by abandoning them and then by breaking them up?

What does this mean for American morality? To me, it calls for demanding that our political leaders rethink what, exactly, they mean when they evoke moral values. It means insisting that they consider how morality is experienced in the real issues facing us and apply the morality of everyday lives, of compassion and love, to political leadership.

Our leaders do not, by the way, have to look far to find examples of how to do this. The many Americans who have taken in families, organized clothing or food drives, and traveled to the areas hit by the hurricane exemplify the best of our values: compassion and responsibility, love and stewardship. Our political leaders rightly praise them, and wrongly try to look better by

doing so, but they cannot diminish the spirit and heart that these Americans have shown. Theirs is a moral vision worth aspiring to.

Now, our leaders need to take this vision seriously. They should use it to rethink policy and government in ways that acknowledge a sense of shared responsibility, recognize that people do not have control over all aspects of their social and economic lives, and help them when they have very little choice at all, out of respect for basic dignity.

A sense of shared responsibility, for example, might mean figuring out ways to deal with Katrina without taking away from resources needed for other crises. It means we do not cut social welfare programs or public health spending because of a hurricane. And we do not worry about implementing more tax cuts for the wealthiest among us.

This is a moral vision that can pull us together rather than tear us apart, build empathy rather than hatred. It has very little to do with how politicians usually talk about moral values, but it may be closer to how most of us live our lives, and how our government and politicians should also lead the country.

When politicians return once again to the mantra of traditional moral values, I hope that they think about Katrina. I hope they remember the images of suffering and indignity that our brothers and sisters suffered in her wake. And I hope they are inspired to hold the country to a new, and higher, moral standard.