

# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

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In August 2005 a hurricane named Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of Mississippi and devastated New Orleans. The aftermath of this natural disaster shocked the world. The *unnatural* social and economic arrangements made by human beings throughout this region resulted in an unprecedented revelation of the terrible human injustice suffered by poor persons, many of them African-Americans. It was a shocking lesson to the nation about the ways the inequality that we have created directly impacts the possibilities for survival in a natural disaster, leaving many with no options for escape from terrible peril. Personal safety was directly threatened for those who had no car, no credit cards for hotel rooms, no access to family or friends, and no neighbors able to respond. Everyone in New Orleans, in particular, was thrown back on their own resources, which often were revealed to be barely enough to keep body and soul together in storm-free times. The reasons the sights of New Orleans were so painful and shocking to privileged Americans were two fold. The first was that the calamity that was Katrina was no one's fault—no one could be blamed for what happened—explanations could not be lodged in the usual narratives that often soften the guilt for the privileged in this country when they are forced to see poverty and social misery. In this case the victims were clearly innocent. The second cause for shock and pain was the realization that we shared blame for the devastating impact of Katrina on the poorest people in New Orleans by ignoring, and thereby allowing, the deep inequality and racism that underlay this Mecca of escape for the privileged and carefree.

The exposure of inequality, racism and indifference by public officials that was the dramatic story of Katrina continues. Even as this is written there are hundreds of families living in FEMA trailers in northern Louisiana who have no place to go. The federal

government refuses to allocate any funds to rebuild low cost rentals in the devastated areas of New Orleans. Only homeowners can apply for federal disaster loans. Housing projects in these areas have not been rebuilt either, even as families camp outside them waiting for someone official to take action to return them to their homes.

This issue of *Reflections* offers another look at the tragedy of Katrina from the perspectives of those who went there to help. Some of these narratives are wrenching and unpleasant in the physical details of shelter living and other horrors they describe. Some offer narratives of incalculable loss on top of loss. The ongoing racism experienced by African-Americans is a subtext of many of these narratives and the central focus of a few. Through them all weaves the theme of resilience, if not reconciliation. These stories introduce us to men and women who suffered, overcame their sufferings and can offer us a kind of grace we rarely experience.

Our deepest thanks and appreciation go to Brenda McGadney -Douglass and Richard Douglass for conceiving this issue and putting it together. It clearly was a labor of love but also one of enormous dedication, persistence and dogged work. They have made this issue of *Reflections* one of our best.

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