



Keith Darce  
2004

My account of visiting St. Anna's after Katrina below is probably far too narrow (and too much about Katrina) to include in what you are working on, but I'm thinking it's worth providing for posterity.

This is the Sept. 14, 2005 passage from the early days of a blog (<http://scoopzone.blogspot.com/>) that I started while working as part of The Times-Picayune reporting team in the city immediately after Katrina hit. It records my activities from the prior day (Sept. 13, 2005) when I drove into the city beyond the French Quarter for the first time and became the first person to enter St. Anna's post-storm as I narrated the visit to you over cell phone. I think the context of the smells I experienced roaming that part of the city earlier in the day is relevant for understanding the beauty of the experience of entering the church. I drove into New Orleans Tuesday and saw my house for the first time.

Amazingly, it looks just as we left it on the inside. No flooding, no roof leaks, no break-ins. The smell was pretty bad, but I tolerated it and managed to empty the refrigerator into trash bags.

Outside, the neighborhood was in better shape than I expected. Some damage to awnings and trees, but no real destruction.

As I turned the corner half a block from the house I froze at the sight of the word "HELP" written with yellow paint in thick upper case letters that spanned the width of the street and ran as long as the fronts of two houses. The plea appeared in front of our neighbor Brenda, who owns a black pug like mine.

I stood there imagining the awful things that might have happened just steps from my home to prompt people to scrawl the sign of desperation.

A block away, an abandoned city bus sat wedged between a sidewalk and second floor balcony. About 15 feet of skid marks offered a glimpse into the bus's buses final moments.

I saw few signs of looting of houses, but on St. Claude Street nearly every storefront was destroyed, including the one on a Hibernia bank a couple of blocks from my house. The big auto repair shop next to the bank was burned to the ground.

I checked on the houses of a few friends in the neighborhood then drove to Constantine's warehouse a few blocks from our house. It weathered the storm well and there were no signs of looting. The neighboring warehouse has been taken over by the National Guard, so Constantine's warehouse should be in safe hands.

Earlier in the trip I went to The Times-Picayune's main office to retrieve my keys and other personal items that I left behind in our hasty evacuation the day after Katrina hit.

I gathered as many overnight bags as I could carry from the third-floor Money section office.

On the inside, the building looks just as we left it. The outside is a different story. Everything was coated in a gray smelly muck. The landscape was amazingly colorless. Trash and debris was randomly strewn in the road and parking lot. There was a small boat stranded in the road. Cars in the parking lot look as though they had been sitting there for decades.

Though nearly six feet of water flooded the area, none entered the press room or other crucial parts of the building.

The city, and even buildings, are filled with a rancid stench - a mixture of rotting garbage, smoke and another smell that reminded me of the odor left by a nest of mice that I poisoned in a wall of a house that I lived in years ago.

Everything is filthy, even the air.

I ended my trip with a stop at St. Anna's, the Episcopal Church that we attend on Esplanade Ave. I'm on the church council so I have a key to the building. I called Fr. Bill Terry on my cell phone as I unlocked the church's front door.

I gasped as I entered. It was pristine, completely untouched. Not a thing out of place. As though mass had been held just a few hours earlier.

Then I noticed the smell. The air seemed fresh and was filled with the aroma of incense. It brought me to tears.

As I left the church, I talked briefly with a guy who was shoveling powdery sediment from the street in front of the house next door. He was shirtless, dusty, and gaunt. He looked detached from the world around him, seeming not to notice that I was standing just a few feet from him. I asked him if he had been in the city since before the storm, and he said yes. I asked if he was okay, and he said yes. I said he must have gone through some pretty tough moments, and he just nodded his head slowly and said, "You have no idea."

Just then, a city bus rolled by as though it were any normal afternoon in the city. But passing on the other side of the boulevard was a big dose of reality - a military truck filled with armed soldiers.

I left the city feeling hopeful.

My piece of New Orleans is pretty much intact, though in bad need of a good scrubbing. Maybe the city I love so much isn't gone forever.

The emotional roller coaster continues.

*Keith Darcé joined St. Anna's and was Confirmed May, 2004 and was a member of the church vestry in 2005 when Katrina tore through New Orleans. At the time, Keith was a staff writer for The Times-Picayune and part of the newspaper's hurricane team that stayed in the city to cover the storm and its aftermath.*