

September 2005

# Virtue In Action

Hurricane Katrina: Stories of Courage, Determination and Disappointment

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION



## VIRTUE IN ACTION

**H**urricane Katrina has completely devastated the cities of New Orleans, Louisiana and Biloxi Mississippi, leaving over 1 million people homeless and killing thousands. The devastation is almost beyond description. However, we have again seen that when confronted with overwhelming challenges people often respond in ways that are truly inspiring, and give us the hope that we can overcome any challenge. In this lesson we will profile stories of courage and determination, and also discuss some of the disappointments, such as the rampant looting in New Orleans and the lack of assistance given to many of the victims.

### **Courage Amidst Disaster**

It is hard to imagine what it would be like to live through such a powerful hurricane, with 145-mph winds and strong waves beating down the walls of your home. People were struck with terror, yet demonstrated great **courage** in overcoming their fear to help their own families and others. One man fell in the raging waters as he was attempting to save another person who was stranded on a nearby rooftop. The attempted rescuer was clinging to a board, barely staying afloat, when two other men leaning over from a bridge pulled the rescuer to safety.

Coast Guard and military helicopter pilots and the rescue swimmers, dangling on the ends of long cables, pulled victims to safety from rooftops. Many of these Coast Guard crews worked non-stop for several days and nights, **determined** to save as many victims as possible. Firemen, policemen and other rescue squads braved the dangers of the flooded streets, and unfortunately at times the gun fire from roving gangs, to fight fires and assist the victims. The rescuers themselves are suffering- physically from their extreme exertion, and also emotionally as they discover victims they could not reach in time.

### **An Opportunity to Serve: even from Katrina**

The unexpected disaster called a lot of people to unexpected service as they forgot their own needs to respond to the needs of others. A woman named Katrina Blankenship from Virginia had a computer design business that she advertised on her personal website, Katrina.com. The night before the hurricane hit Louisiana, calls began pouring in. They were scared to death," she said. "They still are now -- the calls that are coming in with the stories that they have. One caller asked, 'Please, can you help me find my husband?' Kristina decided to help by dedicating her web site as a reference point for emergency numbers, volunteer information, and message boards for missing persons. Katrina now has several friends and volunteers gathered in her living room, taking calls all day and doing all she can to help the victims.

Families across America are volunteering to host children and families who have lost their homes. Thousands of



Homes remain flooded to the rooftop by flood waters from Hurricane Katrina Monday, Sept. 5, 2005 in St. Bernard Parish near New Orleans. (AP Photo)

doctors, nurses and paramedics have come to Louisiana and Mississippi to provide needed medical care. The Red Cross and other relief groups are reporting that in many cities they are receiving thousands of offers from people who want to go to those states and assist in the physical relief effort. Millions of Americans have already responded with financial contributions and millions more will join the effort. All of these acts of kindness and charity speak to the **generosity** of Americans in assisting with our resources, time and talents.

### **Solidarity and Unity**

More than 50 countries have pledged their help to the victims. Some of these nations have recently experienced their own disasters yet want to express their solidarity, a sense of unity, with the victims of Katrina. The Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, explained as he promised a donation of \$8 million to the American Red Cross: “The United States is so often at the forefront of international aid efforts to help less fortunate nations. So it is only fitting that Australia should contribute to the daunting task of helping the thousands of American citizens whose lives have been thrown into turmoil by this unprecedented disaster.” Mathias Schennach, who directs a university’s international relations office in Austria, promised to take in 500 university students from New Orleans. “People here have cold winters and avalanches — so we are familiar with the dangers of nature,” he said. “There is an understanding that if someone is in need, you help.”

Within New Orleans, despite looting and violence, there are also examples of unity. One woman noted that in some parts of the city people were joining together and forming little communities, bringing a sense of **civility** back to the mess. At one bridge, where survivors had gone to escape the flood, a woman gave birth to a child. People who didn’t know each other offered assistance as best they could. One man who had rubbing alcohol for his own medical condition gave it up to assist in the birth. Another man gave his shoe laces to tie off the umbilical cord. All rejoiced at the healthy birth of the child.

### **Disappointment and Looting**

Sadly there were some disappointments in the aftermath of the storm, especially the looting and violence. In New Orleans as people realized that the police were not in control, individuals and mobs decided to simply take whatever they wanted. The news coverage was filled with

images of people running through stores taking jewelry, electronics, guns, clothes, and food. Most don’t fault those who took necessities such as water and food to simply survive. However, much of the looting was simply taking advantage of the disaster to steal. Worse than the stealing, armed gangs attacked other victims, the police, firemen and rescue workers.

Looters even targeted the hospitals, hijacking ambulances to drive out of the city, and stealing supplies from trucks bringing medicines and water to the hospitals. As ambulances and supply trucks were attacked, the drivers stopped coming and the hospitals began to run short on basic supplies. Due to the mobs of looters surrounding the hospitals, patients needing care not available in these hospitals could not be evacuated by land. Until more security was provided, the only way to evacuate patients was by helicopter. There were not enough helicopters available to evacuate the patients quickly enough. Many patients died unnecessarily, including young babies.

It’s important to look at the underlying factors that enable someone to actually decide to steal and to put others lives at risk. The primary factor is a lack of **respect** for others. When we respect others, we acknowledge that every person’s life has dignity and value beyond measure. Those who take advantage of a crisis to loot and to place others’ lives at risk, place little value on the lives of others. We need to do some serious soul-searching as a nation and ask what has and is happening in the lives of these criminals, within our families, within our local communities, and within our nation that so many young people grow up placing so little value on the lives of others.

Some of the looters may not have been trying to put others’ lives at risk, and simply wanted to steal some items from a store. We can all understand how we would be tempted, seeing expensive items unguarded in a store, and especially if we saw many others stealing. This type of situation is the real test of our character, and especially of our **integrity**. We live with integrity when we act according to our moral principles even when there is pressure not to, and doing the right thing- even when nobody is looking.

The looters also demonstrated a lack of **prudence** in not thinking through the implications of their decisions. Councilwoman Jackie Clarkson of the French Quarter in New Orleans commented, “We’re

using exhausted, scarce police to control looting when they should be used for search and rescue while we still have people on rooftops.” We don’t know what all of the looters were thinking as they were stealing; however, we do know that they caused many others horrible suffering and death.

### **Responsibility in Caring for the Victims**

Another disappointment was the lack of care provided to those still in New Orleans and other disaster areas. Estimates are that at least 100,000 people were in New Orleans after the hurricane. Despite the orders of the mayor to evacuate, some chose to stay. However, many simply didn’t have the means to evacuate from the city and other areas at risk. Most of those who remained were the poor who don’t own cars, and public transportation was not provided to evacuate them.

Critics of the government’s response to the crisis are asking why the city of New Orleans didn’t have a plan to evacuate the poor. In addition, once many of the survivors made their way to dry ground at the Convention Center and Super Dome, the level of care was almost non-existent at the Convention Center and inadequate at the Super Dome. At the Convention Center there were almost no working restroom facilities for the 15-20 thousand survivors. Survivors lived for several days without almost no food and water, surrounded by human waste and even the bodies of the dead. It took 4-5 days to evacuate most people from these areas.

When a major disaster strikes, most of us look to the government to provide assistance, especially to those most vulnerable. Government agencies at the city, state and federal levels have been established to provide disaster relief. It is the **responsibility** of these agencies,

such as FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency) to provide food and care to the victims of major disasters. An important part of responsibility is accepting the demands of our chosen duties in life. We expect that those who work for the relief agencies will accept and meet their duties to care for the victims of natural disasters.

It is still too early to assess why the level of care was so inadequate in the days immediately following the hurricane. We should never assume bad intent on the part of those in charge of the relief agencies; however, we need to assess why such dramatic failures occurred so that in the future we can do better in meeting our responsibilities to assist our fellow citizens in need. Potential sources of the breakdown include: a lack of proper planning, a failure to mobilize sufficient resources soon enough, a lack of communication among various levels of government as to where assistance was needed, and a lack of coordination among the various agencies providing the relief.

The devastation of hurricane Katrina has highlighted the best in us, and unfortunately also the worst. We have witnessed stories of courage, determination and generosity in saving and assisting the victims of the storm. However, we have also witnessed stories of people taking advantage of the disaster to steal and to even enact violence on others. This reality reminds us that as a nation we have much work to do in building a culture of individual character and virtue. No matter how disappointed we may now be with the looting, violence and lack of timely aid, it is important to maintain a sense of hope. Hope that with a unified sense of determination and generosity we will overcome this disaster and succeed in helping the victims to rebuild their lives.

### **VOCABULARY**

**Civility:** Courteous behavior; politeness

**Courage:** The capacity to meet danger without giving way to fear; to have the courage of one’s convictions; to be willing to put one’s opinions into practice.

**Determination:** Firmness of purpose; resolve

**Discipline:** self-control; training expected to produce a specific character trait, moral or mental improvement

**Generosity:** Giving freely of our own possessions, time and or talent to someone else

**Hope:** to wish for something with the expectation of its fulfillment.

**Integrity:** Steadfast adherence to an ethical or moral code, especially when tempted to abandon one’s ethics

**Prudence:** To think through the implications of our decision before we take them.

**Respect for Others:** Affirming the dignity and value of a person

**Solidarity:** A shared common interest; active loyalty within a group

**Unity:** Singleness or constancy of purpose or action; continuity

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## **Virtue In Action**

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# Virtue In Action

## Hurricane Katrina: Stories of Courage, Determination and Disappointment

### VIRTUE IN ACTION

### FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

#### Virtues Highlighted

Civility  
Integrity  
Prudence  
Courage  
Respect for Others  
Determination  
Solidarity  
Generosity  
Unity  
Hope

#### Lesson Goals

- Inspire students that we have the ability to overcome significant challenges with courage, determination, generosity, and unity
- Help students understand the above virtues, especially in the context of disasters, and inspire students to live out these virtues in their lives
- Help students understand the virtues of integrity, prudence and respect for others by profiling the harm we do to our communities when we fail to live according to the virtues.

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AP photos

#### Discussion Question Options

1. Let's try to establish a greater sense of empathy with the victims of hurricane Katrina in placing ourselves in their position. Consider a natural disaster in our area, similar in devastation of hurricane Katrina. We will imagine that we are left with no home, no school, our community completely destroyed, and having to rely on the government and relief agencies to survive. How do you think you would feel in this situation? What would you like to see the rest of the country doing to help? What would you want to see in local situations, such as the approach of classmates at your new school?
2. In addition to the positive stories covered in this lesson, what other stories of courage, generosity and determination have you seen during and after the hurricane? What story has been most inspiring for you?
3. What choice did Katrina Blankenship have to make? What was her motivation? Do you think she went over the top, or just did her duty?
4. The United States has always been seen as a world power, and some foreign countries were shocked to see us struggling to deal with the situation. However, the U.S. did not try to hide the weakness. Do you think this was part of the positive response by other countries? Should we accept help from other nations? Are there lessons in this for our personal lives?
5. How likely would it be that you would be able practice virtue in the midst of fear and crisis, if you had not practiced it before? In the midst of the hurricane and its aftermath do you think people can act with virtue spontaneously, or only after a lifetime of living out the virtues in our daily lives?
6. What do you think explains the response of many people after the hurricane in looting, attacking other victims and attacking rescuers?  
(Encourage a discussion of what goes wrong in people's personal lives and in our communities where too many individuals are lacking in respect for others, integrity and prudence.)
7. Let's place ourselves in the position of someone who came out of their home following the hurricane. You see that the stores are left unguarded, and many

others are beginning to loot aggressively, taking whatever they want. What would we do? Would we join in with the group and loot as well, would we take only what we needed to survive, or would we take things like jewelry?

How do our views relate to the virtues of respect, prudence and the golden rule?

Would our decision be different now having thought through the implications of looting, versus before reading this lesson?

8. What are some realistic scenarios in our daily lives where the virtue of integrity is tested and we are tempted to not live according to our principles, either because of peer pressure, or because no one else is watching?
9. Why does civility return when people unify in communities? Why does it disappear when everyone just takes care of themselves?
10. For those of you who have followed the news coverage on the hurricane, what do you think are some of the more likely potential causes for the lack of care provided to the victims?

### Writing Activity

- A. Write about a situation where an unexpected problem gave you the opportunity to serve? How did you assist with the problem? Write about some of the virtues your actions demonstrated.

### Extended Learning Activities

- A. Have a representative for the class contact the local Red Cross, Salvation Army or other organization helping the hurricane victims to assess what items or financial support would be most helpful. Organize a school drive to collect these items, and / or financial assistance.
- B. Ask each student to write a letter of support to a victim, and / or to a rescue worker. As a class, first discuss what themes of support and gratitude they can express. Please note that in addition to the victims, many of the rescue workers are suffering emotionally, having seen many dead victims who they were not able to reach in time. See Coast Guard address below to send letters to the rescuers.

C. Explore the responsibilities of various levels of government in addressing natural disasters. Divide the class into teams to identify and explain what level of government or agency is responsible for:

- Evacuation
- Security
- Aid immediately following the disaster
- Long-term aid for victims

Have each team assess how each government entity responded relative to their responsibilities.

### Related Links

American Red Cross: <http://www.redcross.org/>

Salvation Army: [http://www.salvationarmyusa.org/usn/www\\_usn.nsf](http://www.salvationarmyusa.org/usn/www_usn.nsf)

Second Harvest – The Nation's Food Bank <http://www.secondharvest.org/default2.asp>

Habitat for Humanity <http://www.habitat.org>

Katrina's website: <http://www.Katrina.com>

Mercy Corp <http://www.mercycorps.org>

Storm footage: <http://video.msn.com/v/us/>

### For sending letters to Coast Guard Rescuers

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