

Waking from a Sound Sleep

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We are returning to feel- good America. On Tuesday after Labor Day, the stories on CNN were about levee repair, the numbers of National Guard on the streets, and twin nuns who were rescued along with their dog and parrot. The mood was upbeat, "triumph of the human spirit." Barbara Bush said it all: things would actually be better for these people.

But in the midst of it, a woman was interviewed at the Superdome who was looking for her son. She was African American and had a face that had seen hell. She spoke slowly, almost unintelligibly. She kept saying, "My baby, my baby." Both her dignity and her raw, poor, desperation finally brought the upbeat anchor to her knees. The anchor kept trying to ask those empty anchor questions, "Are you planning to stay right there until you find him?" But the woman would have none of it. "My baby," she said. "I miss my baby. You want to look over at night and see that your child is all right, and I can't do that." Finally, clearly at a loss in the face of pain that was not bending to theme of the day, the anchor quit. Cut.

One of the reasons that last week was memorable, to say the least, was how the story of New Orleans broke through the gloss of business as usual on television. I don't think we are fully aware, no matter how many times it is said, of how television (and print) news create a bubble in which stories are not actually reported as they are, but to fit a proscribed idea of what news should be. I am not saying that reporters lie or make up stories. It's subtler than that.

When I was a cub reporter for Time Magazine, the San Francisco police went on strike one night, and I was sent out to get the news of what was happening on the streets. I drove and walked all over. The streets were empty. Nothing was happening. Two guys were smoking marijuana in a square downtown. End of story. I went back to the bureau and filed. Two minutes later, I got a call. Go back out. There must be violence somewhere. The story had to fit a worldview, or it wasn't a story.

Katrina blew that away. We got the story of what is really happening in the United States right between the eyes. We got the story of how poor people live and are treated in this country by watching them suffer and die. We got the story because it happened so fast, and right in front of our faces and no one could put a spin on it quickly enough. We got the story because television reporters were openly outraged on camera. We got the story because reporters asked real questions, and demanded real answers rather than throwing softballs and settling for the fluff and the spin that passes for news. It was raw, it was awful, and it slid under the skin of our sleepy, numb, feel- good lives.

Midweek, a guy working out next to me (yes, I was still going to the gym) leaned over and said, "Can you believe this?" I only shook my head, but what I wanted to say was, yes, I can. Because here, finally, was the truth. Unavoidable. On TV. Later, I felt so anxious and miserable, I started to cry on the street. At first, I said to myself that I was feeling crisis fatigue. But then I thought, No, there's a better word for it. It's grief. It's grief for how bad it really is, and how sound asleep I've been.

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