



Not So Easy

On May 15th, descending from 31,000 feet, it all looked the same, as beautiful as I had remembered from my last visit several years back. The waters off the coast were that gorgeous aqua and deep blue that made scuba diving some of the best. And, of course, there is the river, with its oxbow cutoffs defining its age in thousands of years. As it approaches the coast, the river becomes like a giant fist that opens, with the splayed fingers moving the water into the sea.

As we got closer to landing, I looked from my window seat to see if I could discern the changes. I guess the speed and the direction of the approach from the west made it look as I had remembered. The airport was the same. I got my bags and hailed a taxi for the 20-minute ride downtown. It was about 6:30 p.m., so the rush-hour traffic (was there still such a thing here?) was gone. The taxi driver was a Nigerian who had been living there for 22 years. Oly clearly loves this city, but allowed as how his wife and daughter had moved to Atlanta. I asked him how much he would charge me to go sightseeing. He said \$30 per hour. I hired him on the spot. It turned out to be the most interesting, disheartening, overwhelming, and disturbing hour I ever spent.

We exited the interstate and headed north on West End Boulevard. I immediately started seeing the changes. We took a right on Robert E. Lee and as we headed east, my senses of sight and sound became overwhelmed. With each revolution of the tires, the unimaginable started to compound. We turned onto Elysian Field then onto Gentilly. Oly stopped the running commentary as we passed 17th Street, as he knew the images needed no explanation. We turned onto Louisa, then onto N. Robinson, then Industrial Canal, then Claiborn, and back onto Elysian Field. I had seen the images live on TV, read a great deal about it afterwards, but nothing prepared me for the devastation that an angry, unforgiving, and powerful Katrina unleashed on New Orleans early on Monday morning, August 29, 2005.

Every person without exception said, "Oh, it looks good now. You should have seen it earlier." I'm not sure I would have wanted to see that. The people of New Orleans have been changed, never to be the same. As December 7, 1941, and 9/11 have become demarcation dates, conversations in New Orleans are liberally sprinkled with the terms "before Katrina" and "after Katrina." The message is loud and clear that before Katrina things were good, as the city's nickname, "The Big Easy", implies. Now it's not so easy. After Katrina, it's a whole new ballgame, mostly negative. There is a heightened distrust of politics – from the President of the United States down to a beleaguered Mayor whose filter between brain and mouth is reportedly missing.

In the Ninth Ward, east of downtown, where the Industrial Canal levee was breached, houses weren't just damaged, they literally disappeared. And it goes on, not just house by house, or even block by block, but mile after agonizing mile. More than 200,000 properties were damaged or destroyed. The Rand Corporation predicts that in 2008, the population will be only half of what it was "before Katrina" - which was 480,000. Labor is almost impossible to find, as are housing and basic services in the most

heavily damaged areas. But wouldn't you know, one of the least affected areas is Bourbon Street. Thank goodness the tourists are back; nobody knows what it would be like if the French Quarter and the central business district had taken a big hit.

We look in horror on TV as refugees from a third world country are fleeing a disaster. But more than 200,000 refugees from New Orleans are currently spread throughout the U.S. I never thought about the possibility of, within 24 hours, losing my home and my job, neither ever to be regained. I was visiting New Orleans to do a leadership program for the Federal Reserve Bank. The last time I was there they had 300 employees. Now they have 105. Every person in the group had in some way been affected by the storm.

I have officially had my wake-up call.

The Leadership Challenge

What is your plan...

...if a hurricane is on the way?

...if a tornado suddenly strikes?

...if a fire breaks out in your place of business or your home?

Will your co-workers or your family know what to do without hesitation?

...a deranged gunman takes a hostage?

...an airplane crashes into the building?

...a tanker truck has a hazardous spill out front?

...someone has a heart attack or a bad cut?

As a leader in your home and organization, you have a responsibility for the safety of co-workers and family members. The challenge is to have a plan that is reviewed from time to time so that the veterans can be reminded and the new folks can be made aware. Now, you might well ask: "Farrell, do you practice what you preach? Do you have a plan for the Moore School Executive Education Center?" It's more than a fair question, and the honest answer is that we do not. But my commitment is that we will have one by the next *Leadership Challenge*, and it will be communicated to all. My challenge for you is to do the same.

I encourage your response to these thoughts. farlgroup@aol.com

Have a great day!

Please forward this on or send us the e-mail addresses of co-workers, friends or family members who might enjoy a monthly leadership thought.

If you would like to see past *Leadership Insights*, please [click here](#).