

“Sick Minds Use Storm to Justify Their Hatred”

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Does it really matter?

The city is flooded, people are homeless and hungry and scared and dead. Shouldn't this be a time for giving money and saying prayers? Should we really care about the color of the people looting in the hurricane zone? Or that Louisiana is a red state? Or that some of the dead are gay?

Apparently, that kind of thing matters to some of us. It matters, for instance, to a black man who posted a note in an online forum saying he is embarrassed by news footage showing that most of the looters are black. It matters to the white people who've sent me notes daring me to explain why blacks are "running amok." It matters to the author of a note circulating on the Internet who says it would be a "problem" for a liberal in a blue state to send relief money to a red state. And it matters to a group called Repent America, which has issued a statement saying the storm was God's way of canceling a gay festival that was to have taken place in New Orleans this week.

It's as tiresome as it is predictable. American disunion being what it is these days, some of us look at even a natural disaster through the distorting prism of bigotry, rancor and fear.

Let me say a few things here. The first is that the city of New Orleans is, according to the last census, 67.3 percent black. Given that looting is predictable under any significant breakdown of social order, who would you expect to find out there smashing windows when the lights go out? Ethnic Hawaiians?

Besides which, white folks loot, too. Only it's not called looting when they do it. I refer you to a widely circulated news photo of a white couple wading through chest-high water after, in the words of the caption, "finding" food. As if that loaf of bread the woman has was just lying by the side of the road.

I'm sorry, but I have little patience for black people who find shame in this looting. Less patience for white ones who find vindication of their bigotry. It makes me angry that some people think these are the conversations we should be having now.

Our countrymen are in dire straits. We are talking in large part about those who had no means of escape, no cars or credit cards, no way to book a flight, reserve a room, buy a bus ticket, hop a train, no choice but to sit there and wait for disaster to come.

They are, by and large, the poorest and most meager among us and they are living through hell right now. Death toll rising like floodwaters, probably heading into the thousands, corpses floating down the street, and some liberal twit is joking -- God, I hope he was joking -- that the blue states should let the red one suffer? People clinging to rooftops, a great city turned into a steaming, stinking primordial swamp, and some alleged Christians think it's a victory for heterosexuality?

Memo to all these nitwits: It was a hurricane, not God's stamp of approval for your small-mindedness and hate.

Tragedy often becomes a stage for the best of human character. But it seems as if this tragedy is also destined to be a stage for the worst, a spotlight on the divisions that have lately grown so much wider between us.

And then there is the TV reporter who met a distraught man in the aftermath of the storm. He told her how his house had broken in two. How he tried to hold onto his wife as the storm and the water raged. How she told him, "You can't hold me" and asked him to take care of the kids and the grandkids. How he lost his grip and she was swept away.

The man was crying as he told the story and it seemed as if the reporter was weeping, too. For the record, he was black and she was white and I wouldn't be surprised if there were also other differences between them. But in that moment, they were just two human beings met at an intersection of inconsolable loss.

There are times when nothing else matters.