

Katrina script

GA 2006 with intro and outro for President and Moderator

The Voices

The Narrator: Jose Ballester

Steve Crump

Eunice Benton

Bill Sinkford

Charlie Clements

Tyrone Edwards

Gini Courter

Marta Valentin

Jim VanderWeele

Dick Harris

Voice #1 – Keitha Whittaker

Voice #2 – Joe Sullivan

Voice #3 – Deanna VanDiver

Voice #4 – John Crestwell

Seated in front row: members of Gulf Coast Relief Fund Panel, staff, volunteers
AND musicians: Jason Shelton, Beth Norton, Sarah Dan Jones, Mary Neumann.

INTRODUCTION (Bill Sinkford):

You have heard about some of the very important work which the UUA and the UUSC have done together in this year. But for me and I am sure for many of us gathered here, the framing event of 2005 AND the year thus far as well, has been our focus on the impact of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita on our lives. The storms brought the UUA and the UUSC into important new relationship as partners – something of which both Charlie and I are proud – and also brought to light the disturbing reality of the failures of government at every level, the reality of ‘two Americas,’ and it amplified the voices of people who will not give up, even though our country has fallen short on its promises over and over.

The words you will hear – almost all of them – were written or spoken in interviews by people who have lived this experience from different perspectives. *<as names are announced, players come on to stage and take their place on stools or at microphones.>*

The Rev. Jose Ballester, minister of the First Unitarian Church of Houston, Texas, narrates this piece and reads the words of Chris Rose, the columnist from the New Orleans Times-Picayune who was a finalist for a 2005 Pulitzer Prize for his remarkable commentary about the impact of the storm on New Orleans.

Our district executive from the Mid-South, **Eunice Benton**, is a lifelong resident of the gulf coast region and a member of the Gulf Coast Relief Fund.

Joe Sullivan is the president of the Southwest Conference of the Unitarian Universalist Association and a member of the Gulf Coast Relief Fund panel.

The Rev. Steve Crump is minister of the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, our congregation which took the lead in coordinating and providing hurricane aid in the critical days immediately following the storm.

Our Moderator, **Gini Courter**, reflected on the needs in the Gulf Coast in December of this year, and has made two trips to that area since then to see the devastation – and the relief effort – firsthand and pitch in.

<**Gini** continues introductions and Bill takes his place as she calls his name>

The Rev. William Sinkford, our president, wrote pastoral letters in the storm's aftermath that spoke to our anguish, our dismay, and our hope, and he has reached out to our congregations and their members in their pain.

Dr. Charlie Clements, President and Chief Executive Office of the UU Service Committee, whose life has been spent working in and for humanitarian relief and aid.

The Rev. Tyrone Edwards, our guest at this General Assembly, is a lifelong resident of Plaquemines [*pronounced "Plak-man's"*] Parish, an area outside New Orleans and nearly obliterated by the storm. He is the founder of the Zion Travellers Cooperative, a grass roots organization that has received funding from the UUA-UUSC Gulf Coast Relief Fund.

Dick Harris is immediate past president of the North Shore Unitarian Congregation in Lacombe, Louisiana.

Keitha Whittaker is president of the Gulf Coast Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Gulfport, Mississippi.

The Rev. Jim VanderWeele is minister of Community Unitarian Universalist Church in New Orleans.

The Rev. Marta Valentin is minister of the First Unitarian Church of New Orleans.

The Rev. John Crestwell is minister of the Davies Memorial Unitarian Universalist Church in Maryland.

Deanna VanDiver was the president of the board of the First Unitarian Church of New Orleans during this past exciting year.

Sinkford: Our voices speak for all those who lived through this storm and who now, work toward restoration and recovery in the Gulf.

Lights Dim.

Opening images from “Inside Hurricane Katrina,” produced by local New Orleanians:

Voice on tape: “Somehow, a natural disaster spirals into unnatural human catastrophe. [voices on tape: we’re devastated...we haven’t eaten in three days....I don’t even know if my kids are alive, man!”

Music up, images roll: Henry Butler’s piano music (“Death Has No Mercy” - cut #10, “Blues After Sunset” CD).18 to 1:15 – “death has no mercy in this land...”

Images end, music fades, spot up on SR stool (Jose Ballester).

Ballester:

September, 2005.

Dear America,

I suppose we should introduce ourselves. We’re South Louisiana. We have arrived on your doorstep on short notice and we apologize for that, but we never were much for waiting around for invitations. We’re not much on formalities like that. And we might be staying around your town for a while, enrolling in your schools and looking for jobs, so we wanted to tell you a few things about us. We know you didn’t ask for this and neither did we, so we’re just going to have to make the best of it.

First of all, thank you. For your money, your water, your food, your prayers, your boats and buses and the men and women of your National Guards, fire departments, hospitals and everyone else who has come to our rescue.

We're a fiercely proud and independent people, and we don't cotton much to outside interference, but we're not ashamed to accept help when we need it. And right now, we need it.

Everybody loves their home, we know that. We love [this place] with a ferocity that borders on the pathological. ... You've probably heard that many of us stayed behind. As bad as it is, many of us cannot fathom a life outside of our border, out in that place we call Elsewhere.

The only way you could understand that is if you have been there, and so many of you have. So you realize that when you strip away all the craziness and bars and parades and music and architecture and all that hooey, really, the best thing about where we come from is us.

We are what made this place a national treasure. We're good people. When you meet us now and you look into our eyes, you will see the saddest story ever told. Our hearts are broken into a thousand pieces. But don't pity us. We're gonna make it. We're resilient.

And one more thing: In our part of the country, we're used to having visitors. It's our way of life. So when all this is over and we move back home, we will repay to you the hospitality and generosity of spirit you offer to us in this season of our despair.

That is our promise. That is our faith.

<images start>

Benton:

And we're also south Mississippi. Just down the road a ways, on route 90, are the saddest sights you'll see in our state. Houses that once were, lying like piles of kindling twenty feet high. Beautiful beaches still littered with the jutting wreckage of boats and gambling casinos and condos and restaurants...rubble. Moss Point's nearly gone. Pascagoula's been slammed. East Biloxi's coast was ravaged ...people, and lives, just disappeared. Where did they go? Where did they all go?

Ballester:

Oh, my city. We have spent hours and hours listening to the radio. Image upon image piling up in your head. What about school? What about everyone's jobs? Did all our friends get out? Are there still trees on the streetcar line? What will our economy be like with no visitors? How many are dead? Do I have a roof? Have the looters found me yet? When can we go home?

<images end>

Crump:

When the hurricane hit, we opened our church, two hours away, to evacuees. Baton Rouge was without power and phone service was spotty at best, but we got the word out as widely as we could that we were taking evacuees and were organizing to help. We had people in members' homes and elsewhere...we acted as an emergency coordination center. We did what we could, as fast as we could.

Voice #2:

Some folks in our district got together and realized that if Unitarian Universalists were going to be able to help support folks in New Orleans and on toward Mississippi, we were going to have to do it from Baton Rouge. New Orleans and the southern coast were inaccessible, we couldn't get in there...So we would operate from Baton Rouge.

Crump:

Folks in our church wrote a grant request to the Gulf Coast Relief Fund, which had just been put together, to help support a community minister who would work with groups coming in and with communities needing help. And it was the first grant made by the Fund and it started the ball rolling.

Sinkford:

Just after the storm, I wrote, on our website:

I am so angry. I've had to stop watching coverage of the disaster along our Gulf Coast. The statements from our political and military leaders that we have "turned the corner," that we have a unified disaster command with "perfect coordination," in response to this "natural disaster" are more than I can bear. I cannot watch one more press conference with congratulations for the "heck of a job" FEMA and the military have done.

Natural disaster? Katrina was certainly a force of nature, although there is substantial evidence that the global warming so many deny increased

the fury of the storm. But we cannot lay responsibility for our response at the feet of Mother Nature.

<images start>

Ballester:

The first time you see it...I don't know. Where are the words? I got to town Monday afternoon. I braced myself, not knowing how it would make me feel, not knowing how much it would make me hurt.

I was escorted out of the local Winn-Dixie by narcotics officers from Rusk County, Texas. I told them I thought it was OK to take what we need. "And what do you need?" the supervisor asked me. I reached into my bag and held up a bottle of mouthwash. I told him I will come back to this Winn-Dixie one day and pay for this bottle and I will. I swear it.

<images end>

Benton:

October, 2005

The weather is beautiful, I don't mind telling you. But if I wrote you a postcard, it wouldn't say, "Wish You Were Here." There are still roses blooming on front porches, and there are still birds singing in the park. But the park is a huge National Guard encampment.

There are men and women from other towns living there in tents and who have left their families to come help us and they are in the park cleaning out the fallen timber. My fellow Americans.

Every one of them tells you they're happy to be here and every time I try to thank them, on behalf of all of us, I just lose it.

Valentin:

For so long, we couldn't even get back into the city. Before the storm, I went to Fort Worth. From there, I went with my wife up to Maine, all the time trying to find my congregation members, trying to minister to them, and then, in those other moments, trying to figure out whether I had an apartment, books, an office, a church, and not knowing how to answer to any of those questions. It was surreal.

Clements:

We hired a disaster specialist to work with the Gulf Coast Relief Fund and beyond. We realized that we were going to need someone who had on the ground

experience with work of the magnitude that we were encountering here. We were lucky to connect with Martha Thompson, who had worked with Oxfam and other organizations in third world countries. Later, Martha told us she had never seen such chaos around recovery work as she saw in the Gulf Coast – even third world countries do better than we've done in the United States.

Voice #4:

Amazingly until yesterday, I was the only minister available to evacuees at the Jackson Coliseum for pastoral care, though the local Episcopal Church seems to be organizing cooking food and serving meals ...a very necessary ministry! I will not say though, that pastoral care is all I have done, as I been seen sweeping, giving directions in an effort to eliminate some of the confusion, and sharing information in an effort to keep "wild" rumors from flying.

VanderWeele:

I spent the first several months after the storm on the phone and email, just trying to find people from my church, talking to them. I had to be prepared for not knowing what would happen next...sounds strange, but true...and then I had to go wherever I was needed, and try to do the next things that would help, not knowing what would come after.

Voice #3:

The stress of losing your home, your possessions, your car – if you had one – all of it gone, is huge. Lots of us are in FEMA trailers. Heck, some of us have been given FEMA trailers but they still haven't given us the key or hooked up the electricity or water, so what's the point?? So we just go from one day to the next, doing what we can.

Sinkford:

I am fighting not to sink into paranoia, though as a person of color I have a lifetime of experience which would provide ample justification.

These last days have provided a picture of what racism and classism and privilege look like. Racism is not about individual prejudice. Classism is not about individual poverty. And privilege is so often allowed to be invisible.

I am so angry. Look at New Orleans. Tens of thousands of American citizens, almost all of them poor and Black, living in unimaginable

conditions with no food and water, waited for days while evacuation buses passed them by to pick up tourists from luxury hotels.

Citizens in devastated small towns on the Gulf Coast are still without evacuation or adequate supplies.

Clements:

November, 2005.

You responded. You opened your hearts and your pocketbooks in huge numbers. This became the most successful joint fund raising effort our organizations ever undertook. But the challenge of how to help both a region in shambles and our Unitarian Universalist congregations, was very complicated. The infrastructure was essentially gone. People were just trying to survive. Networks and coordinating agencies didn't exist, so we've had to figure that out from scratch.

Ballester:

Down on St. Claude Avenue, a tribe of survivors has blossomed at Kajun's Pub where, incredibly, they have cold beer and cigarettes and a stereo playing Elvis...the people here have a touch of Mad Max syndrome; they're using an old blue Cadillac for errands and when parts fall off of it – and many parts have fallen off – they just throw them in the trunk.

A guy with a long goatee and multiple tattoos was covering a couple of aluminum foil pans of lasagna and carrying them up to the roof to cook them in the sun on the hot slate shingles.

A National Guard truck pulled up and asked if they were ready to leave yet. Two guys out on the sidewalk in the company of pit bulls said: "Hell no." [One of the men] said: "We're the last fort on the edge of the wilderness. My family's been in exile for three hundred years; this ain't shit." I just don't see these people leaving.

Voice #2:

I run by the River every morning before it gets too hot with other people who have lost their homes. It's the only way I can stay sane and manage the stress. Then I come back here and try to do what I can to reclaim this city.

Harris:

Our church made out better than some. We had people who lost everything – especially in Slidell – and we sure have lost members, including someone who survived the storm and died in his FEMA trailer last week. He had testified over and over that the UU faith saved his life. And in a way, he’s another victim of the storm too.

Voice #1:

I miss the beauty of the coast...I can’t drive down Route 90 without tearing up...that’s so sad.

Harris:

It’s a loss of our history; our community...

VanderWeele:

It’s like waiting for the other shoe to drop...I guess I’m on edge for what people are experiencing, wondering if I am ready or prepared for it, or capable of responding to it the way I think would be most helpful to folks since I am in the middle of it too.

[cue music as speech starts]

Crump:

I spoke with a man on Sunday who said, "Reverend, I've worked hard all my life. I have provided for my family. We had a nice home, and nice furniture. It's all gone now; we have nothing. I've paid my taxes. All these years. But now I can't provide for my family; I can't protect my family..... Reverend, do you know how that feels? I feel forgotten." I made promises I pray to God I can fulfill. I said, "We will not let you fall through the cracks. We are committed to you. We are set back, but we are not stopped."

[music builds during the speech above: [“Butler’s Boogie, cut # 4, 0-:53 and fade]; as images roll, changing every five seconds. Music fades, images fade, pause, and next speech resumes]:

Ballester:

Yes indeed, all is returning to normal. I think there is no better indication of this than the running commentary that has been taking place on the plywood boards mounted over the windows of Sarouk Shop Oriental Rugs down on St. Charles Avenue near Lee Circle. Early on, in the hairy days of Aftermath, the owner/proprietor/squatter who was living there spray painted: “Don’t try: I am

sleeping inside with a big dog, an ugly woman, two shotguns and a claw hammer.”
Claw hammer. Nice touch.

Then, in a spray paint posting dated 9/4/05 it says: “Still here. Woman left. Cooking a pot of dog gumbo.” Like I said, dire times call for dire humor. Or maybe it wasn’t a joke: some strange things have happened around here lately.

Anyway, in a spray painted update, dated 9/24, it said: “Welcome back, y’all. Grin and bear it.” Ain’t that the truth? I mean, what are the other choices?
<images end>

Benton:

In Mississippi at the Coliseum today there were guardsmen hanging sheets on the folded bleachers behind an arch covered with silk flowers at one end of the building. There was going to be a wedding. A couple from New Orleans was getting married August the 28th, but instead evacuated with both families to the Coliseum. Local people had heard about their wedding plans and decided to help them. Everything was donated, the gowns for the bride and her three bridesmaids and a flower girl, and tuxedos for the groom and his attendants including the young ring bearer, wedding cakes, and a stay in a hotel for the honeymoon, all were donated! There was a wedding photographer donating his time, and a wonderful saxophonist with a sound system and some recorded music.

I took some of the children in the shelter to watch...we sat above in the bleachers and gathered around the area to watch ...Yes, it was a bit of a side show, but it did me and many others good to share the couple's joy. As the vows were being said, the sound of the humanity behind the well-wishers-babies crying and children shrieking as they played, echoed in the Coliseum. Tears flowed and smiles were shared. Yes, love has survived once again.

Harris:

It has been said to me, almost a dozen times in exactly the same words: “Everyone here is mentally ill now.” Some who say this are health care professionals voicing the accumulated wisdom of their careers and some are laymen venturing a psychological assessment that just happens to be correct.

Voice #1:

There is so much uncertainty about the recovery here...post traumatic stress will be an epidemic the first time a hurricane enters the Gulf this summer...that stress is there. And there are real psychological problems throughout the community...doctors say that they have never seen the mental health of the community this bad...people who have never experienced mental illness are suffering from depression.

Ballester:

With all due respect, we're living in Crazy Town.

The only lines at retail outlets longer than those for lumber and refrigerators are at the pharmacy windows, where fidgety, glassy-eyed neighbors greet each other with the casual inquiries one might expect at a restaurant: "What are you gonna have? The Valium here is good. But I'm going with the Paxil. Last week I had the Zanax and it didn't agree with me."

Voice #2:

December 2005.

People and things are so scattered...I run into people all the time who didn't get to stand in line and get their FEMA checks or get help from the Red Cross..they got left out.

Voice #1:

I have a severe case of compassion fatigue and I don't know that there is a cure.

Ballester:

I have this terrible habit of getting into my car every two or three days and driving into the Valley Down Below, that vast wasteland below sea level that was my city, and it's mind blowing A) how vast it is and B) how wasted it is.

My wife questions the wisdom of my frequent forays into the massive expanse of blown-apart lives and property that local street maps used to call Gentilly, Lakeview, the East and the Lower 9th. She fears that it contributes to my unhappiness and general instability and I suspect she is right.

Perhaps I should just stay on the stretch of safe, dry land Uptown where we live and try to move on, focus on pleasant things, quit making myself miserable, quit reliving all those terrible things we saw on TV that first week.

That's advice I wish I could follow, but I can't. I am compelled for reasons that are not entirely clear to me. And so I drive. I drive around and try to figure out those Byzantine markings and symbols that the cops and the National Guard spray-painted on all the houses around here, cryptic communications that tell the story of who or what was or wasn't inside the house when the floodwater rose to the ceiling.

In some cases, there's no interpretation needed. There's one I pass on St. Roch Avenue in the 8th Ward at least once a week. It says: "1 Dead in Attic." That certainly sums up the situation. No mystery there. It's spray painted on the front of the house and probably will remain there for weeks, months, maybe years, a perpetual reminder of the untimely passing of a citizen, a resident, a New Orleanian. One of us.

<music up, images roll: "Louisiana 1927- Randy Newman (version by Aaron Neville) – total song runs 3:02>. Images fade and sound down:

Sinkford:

Isn't it deception to say that this disaster was a surprise when government reports have predicted it for decades? These reports predicted that the poor, Black neighborhoods in the lowest lying areas of the city would be the most devastated. Funds for the Iraq occupation took precedence.

Why were there so few National Guard or regular Army troops available for the relief effort? Can we believe that the deployment of Guard units to contain resistance to our occupation of Iraq had no impact on our response? Our national priorities are clear.

The media is far from blameless. Why were Blacks described as looters and Whites described as "searching for food"? Where were the images of white New Orleans police officers "searching for food" as they carried off wide-screen TV's?

Voice #2:

January 2006.

We know that people of color and different class backgrounds get treated differently by city services, by lenders. There are differentiations here that make a real impact.

Renters and homeowners are treated differently...Go into the 9th ward: notice that except for some campaign appearances, no city or state official

has been there...any work there is being done by grass roots organizations. If there are going to changes they are going to be done by grass roots groups.

Steve Crump:

The Gulf Coast Relief fund is supporting restoration work all around this area. When the first bus arrived at the astrodome in Houston, the Jeremiah Group, one of our grantees, met the evacuees. Because large numbers of evacuees ended up in cities where there's a strong Jeremiah network, that gave us good inroads to help organize. We have put an agenda together from the local perspective as well as others...and worked to make sure that the Mayoral candidates knew the concerns of our people.

Voice #3:

February 2006.

We worked on voter registration and on voting accessibility: displaced evacuees had to have a place to vote without having to travel back to their voting precinct. That helped with voter turnout in the election. We also worked on an early voting process to make sure that peoples' rights weren't being violated.

Voice #4:

And when this measure went to the legislature, it lost the first time. But we had built some relationships with legislators, and we got a comparable bill passed in the state Senate. And one of the legislators said "it was those religious folks who had their pastors calling" that got the bill passed, and he said, "now they are out there singing 'Kumbayah.'" We did it!

Voice #2:

And it was a joint effort. We brought in evacuees, met with legislators, members of the Service Workers International Union, and other community organizing groups, and made sure that people could vote. It felt great.

Benton:

It would be one thing if there was a concerted rebuilding effort going on in Mississippi. You think that the people you elect would be now have a plan...some idea...The mayor of Biloxi lost his home, most for the folks in government lost their homes. But we have elected folks to government office to have a plan. Accept or decline the FEMA guidelines, and build. But we can't make a decision and take ownership for what we do.

Voice #1:

We need to learn from this...no one wants to say, 'this is the way we are going to do it, we've had input, and we are going to get on with it.' But nothing's happening.

VanderWeele:

March 2006.

Our church may have to be razed. The water has caused sand to go under the building and made it unstable...and it's too low now, for the new flood regulations. We'd started to clean it, and then found out that there was likely no way to save it...maybe a chance, but probably not. So we've planted some flowers out front, put out the sign that tells people how to find us, and we're trying to figure out what's next.

Voice #3:

I had an interesting experience...I had a friend up north in western New York and I told her, 'there's nothing down here.' She had come to the casinos two years ago. But the question she asked was, 'what did you folks do with the donations we sent down?' I thought, 'you are talking to me from western New York. There are hundreds of thousands of people there are down here...there is no infrastructure, and you don't understand how much it takes to do this job.'

Voice #4:

Unless you see it, you have no idea.

Ballester:

Where are we now in our descent through Dante's nine circles of hell?
God help us.

We have to fight this thing until there is no fight left. This cannot be the way we go out. ... My neighbor said she is not going to run away from this. She is a New Orleans girl and this is where she is going to stay and try again. And again. And again.

She told her friends this weekend that she still has hope. I don't know what flavor of hope that she's got, or how she got it, but if she's got a taste of it in her mouth, then the rest of us can take a little spoonful and try to make it through another day, another week, another lifetime.

It's the least we can do.

Courter:

April 2006.

There's good news, incredible news. In the past months, Unitarian Universalists have been on the ground in New Orleans, Gulfport, Hattiesburg, and Beaumont. Across the nation we have opened our hearts and our doors. We have contributed over \$3 million for Gulf Relief. A matching grant from the Shelter Rock congregation puts our total at over \$3.5 million. We Unitarian Universalists can raise large amounts of money, enough money to make a real difference. And we are not done yet because the needs are great.

These people – our grantees who are being helped by the Gulf Coast Funds, the people of these cities of the south, the members of our congregations, our sisters and brothers in faith and in spirit – they will not give up. Despite all that has happened, despite the outrage and failures, they will not give up. And that is what makes this story, for all of its frustration and insanity, a story of hope.

Voice #4:

May 2006.

We've tried to provide a vision of hope to the people of this town. This church is where we set up computers and fans...and we got rolling. We started coordinating food distribution...People came in looking for other help and we could provide it. People started showing up and setting up meetings with organizations, and mapping out strategies. And that was how the grid system arose. We mapped out the city and started assessing needs and then trying to get aid groups to help. We had a plan of action for distribution of food and cleaning supplies, and started collapsing them as stores and restaurants came on line. We didn't want to keep them open when the businesses were here, because those businesses are very fragile and they need our support to survive.

We made sure people had food stamp cards to buy groceries...we started rolling with unemployment checks, that enabled people to buy things -- clothes, food, cleaning supplies, water, cleanup kits, tents. People didn't have any place to stay, everything went under water...so we got tents – they were the hottest item for a long time. We also did bike distribution, so that people could ride around the city...probably gave away 700 of those!.

Voice #2:

I will not give up. I will not leave. This has been my home for generations, for me and for my family, and I am not going to leave it. And I am not going to allow it to be bulldozed. And I am not going to sell it. It's mine, and I'm not leaving.

VanderWeele:

We still have hope. We would love to have religious education rooms of the right size, windows looking out, a place where this faith could have a real presence in the city. We've taken a close look at New Orleans. The situation here will require assistance for a long time, but with that, we believe there is a chance that our liberal faith tradition can have a life here.

Voice #4:

I will not believe that there is no goodness left in the world. I've seen it from you. You helped my organization when no one else would. Because of you, we've been able to clean and gut the houses of the people of this city. You were there. You made a difference.

Benton:

We are coming home to stay.* And the Gulf Coast Relief Fund is helping the people of this region to reclaim their lives. That is sacred work. And in the worst of times, Unitarian Universalists have stepped forward to say that we are united in restoring our cities and maintaining a UU presence.

*<*at point noted above, Tyrone Edwards moves to center microphone to speak.>*

Tyrone Edwards:

My name is Tyrone Edwards.

< images start.>

Edwards speaks, extemporaneously. For full text, refer to videotape version of this script on uua.org's GA 2006 coverage, Friday night plenary.

**<slides end>*

<Tyrone returns to his previous position on the stage>

Ballester:

May 2006.

What happened was, our lives and social structures and friendships and classmates and easy routines were blown across the globe on one fateful morning and now everything is different.

Just like that.

These are the questions that nag me.

I think my friend...has summed it up best: "A time will come when someone asks you: What were you doing about it? You can't tell them: 'I was just watching it. I was just an innocent bystander.' Let me tell you something: There are no innocent bystanders in this."

My own call to arms has been that you're either part of the solution or you're part of the problem and it's time we become part of the problem because the solution, whatever it's been up to now, ain't workin'.

So I'm Charlie Brown now. The whole [Gulf Coast] is Lucy. And I'm gonna kick that ball a country mile.

Voice #2:

Every person, whether they are rich or poor, deserves a voice. Every person deserves the right to return to their home if they want to come back. Every person, no matter who they are, needs the chance to benefit from the opportunity and the money that is in this city, coming from the grass roots, directly from the people. Right now the voice of the people is silenced...and if we don't act, it will be permanently silenced. So in acting we ensure that all voices are heard.

Valentin:

When you are here in this environment and you see what is around you and what is being struggled with, you think, I am going to get out of my comfort zone and make a connection with you, and if I don't there may be some real hard consequences because of what we are living with. This is an opportunity for UUs to come down here and learn what it is like to not be in the comfort zone. This is not a vacation...people have to be willing to rough it and to learn about what that could mean for them, and what they could learn from that. Even if you pack your bag to go to the hills of Guatemala, it's not the same as coming down here and being in the middle of the disaster zone. But if people allow themselves to be open and flexible, it will allow them to experience untold gifts.

Voice #3:

We worked on a Get Out the Vote strategy for early voting and absentee ballots that were part of the mayoral election. People who are all over the country now showed up to vote in their city's election. Houston delivered about 5,000 votes, for instance...and we know we were

responsible for about 8,000 ballots from around the country in that election, that we can track.

On April 8, we came to the Mayor to present an agenda for the future. We put together a score card on city services, advocating for public land for nonprofits to develop, information on education and what schools were open to have a system for schooling, housing. We're seeking a national pot of about \$150 million to establish an effort like the Nehemiah Project in New York. We want two tracts of land in Orleans and Jefferson parish where we want to do affordable housing projects. The middle class in this city is just about gone, and we think that class wants to be part of this effort.

Clements:

And that is also the work of the Gulf Coast Relief Fund: to make sure that everyone, no matter who they are or where they live or how much money they don't have, has a chance to come home.

Voice #2:

To reclaim our homes.

Voice #3:

To rebuild.

VanderWeele:

To reclaim our lives and our city.

Voice #4:

To march in second line parades.

Voice #1:

To sit on my stoop with my neighbors.

Crump:

To cook a pot of gumbo together.

Valentin:

To be treated with dignity.

Sinkford:

We must learn from this disaster. New Orleans will most certainly be rebuilt; the economic engine of this nation requires a thriving port at the mouth of the Mississippi. But will New Orleans be rebuilt in the image of the past, which marginalized so many of its citizens? Can we not craft a vision grounded in the search for justice, equity and compassion?

Crump:

We need to keep this issue alive politically, and through the way we deal with trauma and in the ways we support people. Remember that this could be you next. There are huge issues of justice and human dignity that have to be addressed if we are to ever recover from this.

Voice #1:

We need a Unitarian Universalist presence here along the Mississippi gulf coast, so that we can go out into the community and speak for those who don't have a voice...There are people here who don't have homes any more, but nobody's going to listen to just me. A church that has a strong history on social justice issues, could be a strong presence in the community..and perhaps, from there, we might be able to talk about building up the whole coastwide community. We need to be here. And for that to happen, we need support.

Valentin:

I want Unitarian Universalists to know that it's not just about putting up a wall when they come down here to help...that needs to happen, but it is about something more: it is about this extraordinary opportunity to share how each of you have lived out your faith wherever you are. And we say, "this is how we do it here," and together, we find that common ground.

Ballester:

There is no lesson here. No moral other than that we have to erase all the bad things we used to do around here – big and small – if we want to survive. We need to be civil. We need to be clean. We need to change. We need to respect ourselves and our city.

Voice #3:

We are rebuilding our church. And when it's re-opened, its doors will be open to groups in the city that are working for change, working to help people return and reclaim their lives. That has been our history, and even more, it will be our future.

Edwards:

Sharing our culture helps people to come together. We have used the church in my town to do that. And even though it was just a community meal, it was good. This is how we can celebrate each other, and when we do that, our bonds become closer, and we know we can support what each other is doing...we become family.

Valentin:

The larger image of what New Orleans is about is one of a play ground, where crazy people live, almost un-UU-like in some ways...but one of the things I have been thinking about is that I have a group of marginalized people in my congregation...they were told that once and were highly offended. But later, we talked about how marginalized people know how to bring people into the circle. Then I realized that UUs were marginalized as well...We are very small, we are marginalized because of our principles that we are living out. This is challenging stuff. Most people want what is due them and they will go on. But out of this experience, we are asking the hard questions and trying live out the answers.

<images start as Sinkford speaks>:

Sinkford:

We are a gentle and generous people. But let us not forget our anger. May it fuel not only our commitment to compassion but also our commitment to make fundamental changes. Our vision of the Beloved Community must stand against a vision that would allow the privilege of the few to be accepted as just and even holy.

We are, and we should be, both a gentle, and an angry people.

Courter:

Relief efforts are just the start. New Orleans was not a thriving or just or equitable community before Katrina. As New Orleans rebuilds, our Unitarian Universalist values must be present. Just as we rebuilt congregations in Chicago after the 1871 fire, we will need to help our sisters and brothers rebuild in New Orleans. Unitarian Universalists will be working in Mississippi and Louisiana for a long time. I hope that we will continue to be known for our generosity and the quality of work we are doing with the congregations and communities in the gulf region.

Yes, the folks from the Gulf region have been much in my mind. They've been in your minds, too. We've had communities and congregations and congregants under water. People who've lost everything they had. Church buildings that are no more. And beyond even that, cities with no plan for their future, cities that don't even exist any more. This is not something Unitarian Universalists forget, even after the media have moved on to a more tasty sound bite, a less waterlogged story.

So don't forget. Carry these faces, these dreams for what America SHOULD be and still can be, in your heart and your mind. And do something about it. Volunteer your time. Give money. Advocate for change so that the story of the Gulf region doesn't happen again when the next hurricane strikes.

<images end>

Voice #1:

As a Unitarian Universalist I feel proud of the UUs who have come here...and we have been blessed ourselves...One of the UUA churches sent money to help us for the first few months, and they want to work with us and maybe become a partner with us. We have received money from the Gulf Coast Relief Fund...and with it, we are going to do the floors in our new worship space and paint the walls. We have received donations and well wishes...and we've had gift cards sent.

Benton:

One of our churches won a chalice lighter grant from the Metro New York district...fifty percent of that grant is going to their fellowship, and the other fifty percent is going to other Mississippi gulf coast UU congregations. I have felt Unitarian Universalists reaching out from across the nation. And it would be wonderful to have a thriving church here on the coast, because we could reach out into the whole Gulf Coast community -- and this community needs Unitarian Universalism!

Valentin:

To me this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to recreate the world how we would like it to be. And how it goes in New Orleans is how it will go in the rest of the country. I look at this church and I say that I am having this opportunity to rebuild, or build, a continental UU church...it is being rebuilt by the hands of UUs all over the country.

Crump:

We've had groups coming in from around the country, going through Baton Rouge, going through Gulfport, helping to rebuild. It's been great to see the connections developing and to see this work getting done, and to know that it's transforming us too.

Sinkford:

Our religious vision must again and again ask the Gospel question "Who is my neighbor" and strive always to include more and more of us as we intone the words that gave birth to this nation, "We the people..."

Ballester:

This was the year that defines our lives, our destiny. Nothing comparable has ever happened in modern times in America, and there is no blueprint for how we do this.

We just wing it. Do good work. Save someone or something.

[pause, images start behind him as he speaks – images of rebuilding]

You'd have to be crazy to want to live here. You'd have to be plumb out of reasonable options elsewhere.

Then again, I have discovered that the only thing worse than being [here] is not being [here]. It's a siren calling us home. It cannot be explained...

We have a job to do here, and that is to entertain the masses and I don't mean the tourists. They're part of it, of course, but what we do best down here – have done for decades – is create a lifestyle that others out there in the Great Elsewhere envy and emulate.

<Jason Shelton and musicians quietly move to the edge of the stage for their entrance>

Our music, our food, yada, yad, yada. It's a tale so often told that it borders on platitude but it is also the searing truth: We are the music: We are the food. We are the dance. We are the tolerance. We are the spirit.

And one day, they'll get it.

[pause]

That, people, is the final word on 2005.
...but it's not the end of this story.

Music up.

Jason Shelton and musicians* up to center mics for SONG: “We Can’t Wait Till the Storm is Over” by Jason Shelton and Connye Florance.

(camera on Shelton and singers to start):

**musicians: Susan Peck, Piano; Beth Norton, Mary Neumann, Sarah Dan Jones, backup singers; Jason Shelton, lead vocal.*

Even dreams fall apart
In the wind and the rain;
Wild waves of storm rush in,
And nothing is ever the same.
When your whole life's been washed away
And it's hard to see the light,
You can call on a friend with a hand to lend And together we'll be alright.

'Cause we're all in this together
In the good times and the pain.
We can't wait 'til the storm is over
We've got to learn to work in the rain.

When your faith is drowned
In a river of lies;
When hope is washed away
And courage is hard to find
(You've got to) Keep your head above water,
Hold on and believe.
Just reach out to a friend with a hand to lend
And those waters will soon recede.

'Cause we're all in this together
In the good times and the pain.
We can't wait 'til the storm is over
We've got to learn to work in the rain.

In every life the rain will fall
That's just the way it must be.
Yes, the waters will rise, but if hope stays alive Even the storms can set us
free.

(So it's up to you and me...)

Note:

(audience is invited to join in singing the chorus at this point):

'Cause we're all in this together
In the good times and the pain.
We can't wait 'til the storm is over
We've got to learn to work in the rain.

Yes we're all in this together
In the good times and the pain.
We can't wait 'til the storm is over
We've got to learn to work in the rain.
We've got to learn to work in the rain.
We've got to learn to work in the rain.

images continue for :30 from music up and switch to live shots of musicians and those on stage.

Lights up.

Post-presentation text:

Courter: Now's the time for you to think about what you will do to contribute. When you came into this hall, the ushers offered you information describing the work of the Gulf Coast Relief Fund. If you give money, we'll put it to good use ...helping our congregations and helping people who are being left out of the relief and support loops in the Gulf, and supporting folks in their right to return to their homes.

Clements: If you want to get your hands in this – and we hope you do – we want you to know that there are folks ready to network you to opportunities for hands on work, whether you're a carpenter or electrician, or a research scientist, a student, a computer programmer, or whatever. If you can make the time, we can put you to work. If you want to work for change in the way the government has handled this crisis – because we know there will be others – we've got ways for you to do that to, through advocacy and lobbying efforts.

Sinkford: So please review this material carefully. Fill out the information card and turn it in as you leave the hall or at the Gulf Coast Relief Fund booth in the

exhibit hall. Together, this past year, we've done a lot. I know that we can do more...and we need to. What happened on the Gulf Coast will take years of dedication on the part of all of us to rebuild, and together, we can turn the tide. It begins with us. And thank you.

-- *written by Deborah Weiner*