

# Places that Disasters Leave Behind<sup>1</sup>

Bruce Janz

September 10, 2004

In 2004 Orlando Florida was hit with an almost unprecedented series of storms and hurricanes. Within less than a month, Hurricane Charley and Hurricane Frances hit, and Hurricane Ivan made a near miss. Billions of dollars of damage resulted from these disasters, and several dozen lives were lost.

It is tempting, in the case of extreme events, to either regard them as having no need of interpretation, or as a kind of rare window on the workings of a community.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I want to examine the public construction of meaning of the hurricane, particularly in Orlando, and compare it with the construction of the hurricane in a community that was also on the path of the hurricane, Ft. Myers, as well as another disaster situation I am familiar with, which was the bombing of the American Embassy in Nairobi in 1998. I am particularly interested in place-making, that is, the ways in which places gain or fail to gain meaning at times of stress. I will suggest that opportunities for place-making were lost in Orlando, and were more fully realized in both Ft. Myers and Nairobi, because the events around Hurricane Charley were framed differently by the media. Hurricane Frances, though, was treated differently in the Orlando press

A word of explanation is needed at the beginning. In speaking of a disaster as “constructed”, I do not mean to minimize its impact on people and communities. “Construction” refers to the rhetorical ways in which we choose to understand the world. Hurricanes and bomb attacks happen, of course, and they are not made up. Certainly their effects are profound, disruptive, and in many cases fatal. However, we have choices of interpretation in these cases. One might, for example (and some did)

interpret the events as the actions of God bringing retribution upon a community for something. One entry on a weblog in the *Orlando Sentinel* went as far as suggesting that the hurricane was God's wrath for Orlando's hosting of "Gay Days", a celebration of gay culture held each year (the writer conveniently overlooked the fact that the same prediction had been made by Pat Robertson about Hurricane Andrew in 1992, and its path diverted away from Orlando and ran straight into his own community - God's agency is evidently capricious). The point is that considering the construction of an event does not diminish either its reality or its consequences to people. It does, however, tell us something important about the places we live in, and about the ways that places are constructed and made available at extreme times.

### **Part One: Charley**

Hurricane Charley hit the Florida peninsula late in the day on Friday, August 13, 2004. While its arrival had been predicted several days in advance, its fury surprised most people. It was upgraded from a category 2 to a category 4 hurricane just hours before it hit shore. It left 23 dead, thousands displaced, and billions of dollars of property destroyed. Everyone was affected, either directly or through people close to them.

Initially, as I sat in the dark in my apartment after Hurricane Charley, I thought that there were similarities to Nairobi in August 1998 when the US Embassy was bombed. I had arrived in Nairobi the day before for a sabbatical, and was staying at a hotel only about a mile or so away from the bomb site. But the more I thought about it, the more it seemed that the events were materially different, and had also been framed differently by the respective societies. First, though, I need to deal with a difference

that seems like one but really isn't.

The Nairobi disaster was a premeditated and murderous attack, while the hurricane was a natural event. This may seem to be a significant difference, making the Nairobi attack more like the events of 9/11 than like the hurricane. But it is worth pointing out that the attack in Nairobi was not an attack on Kenya, but an attack on the US Embassy. Kenyans very much felt like collateral damage in the attack - even though over 200 of them were killed as compared to a couple of dozen US citizens, the US response to the Kenyan people was perceived as very limited and grudging. The US had its embassy in downtown Nairobi (even though it recognized the potential of a threat, and had moved embassies in other places such as Tanzania, which was also bombed, to more remote areas), and so was seen as having made choices that put Kenyans at risk in a battle that was not theirs.

So, despite the fact that the Nairobi attack was caused by humans, while the Hurricane Charley was a natural disaster, there is more in common between the two than it may first appear. The people of New York were directly under attack in 9/11; the same cannot be said for either the people of Nairobi in August 1998 or the people of Orlando in August 2004.

Having said this, it was noteworthy to hear a radio announcer (with in-studio guests) take great delight when Hurricane Charley was downgraded to a tropical storm. It was almost as if "we had beaten it", that it had dealt us a severe blow but now no longer lived. No doubt naming storms gives them the illusion of a kind of agency on its part, and its "demise" could produce pleasure when that agency has disappeared for good.

There were other more significant differences. For example, far more people were killed in Nairobi than were killed in Florida, but far more property was damaged in Florida than was in Nairobi.

This is significant because the Nairobi attack was understood as a tragedy because of the people who were killed or injured (even though several large office buildings were also destroyed), while the Orlando hurricane was understood as a tragedy because of the property that was destroyed, which disrupted peoples' normal routines. As a tragedy of property, the response in Orlando was to very quickly give it an economic frame (as opposed to Ft. Myers, for instance, where the damage was more severe, and the displacement of people more serious).

Perhaps the most important difference, though, is the difference between Nairobi and Orlando. I believe that the reactions to the disasters are a window on the different kinds of places. It was striking in Nairobi how ethnic differences and rivalries were forgotten for about 2 weeks after the attack. Kenyans came together in a way most people had never seen before. Strangers helped each other. It was noted time and again, both officially and unofficially, that Kenyans were willing to help strangers in any way necessary.

In Orlando, on the other hand, there was little evidence of strangers coming together. By "little evidence" I do not mean that it did not happen, but that it was not reported (as I will outline below). Strangers would strike up conversations more readily in restaurant lines (which could be prodigious, since so few were open - waits of 2.5 - 3 hours were not uncommon), but there was little evidence that people looked out for anything but themselves. I asked a friend, a long-time resident of Florida, whether people in his neighbourhood had helped their neighbours, and he snorted, as if the idea was ridiculous. He opined that the disaster had not been severe enough to necessitate such interaction.

A couple of things are worth noting about these observations. First, they are anecdotal. I am not interested in making the generalization that "Orlandonians did not help each other" - that would

require a different kind of study than this. I make these comments because they are what initially made me wonder how the disaster had been constructed by the media. Second, it must be recognized that the anecdote probably could not be generalized. Families helped others in their family, and friends helped friends. My friends helped me - many were generous in their offers of help. And, it is worth noting that the claim that neighbours did not come together is not universally true. In some places, people reported strangers helping each other. And yet, even in those places, people I talked with mentioned feeling isolated. It would no doubt be possible to perceive a difference of community sentiment in different regions of the city. The observation I make about the relative lack of community support is really a way of getting at the social construction of the disaster. This was a disaster understood as an individual and economic one, which did not support place-making in the way that the attack in Nairobi did.

There was at least one person who made the *Orlando Sentinel* as “The Hero of Berwick Street”.<sup>3</sup> This person purchased two chain saws, and was going around the neighbourhood clearing trees that had fallen, and which in some cases had damaged property. What is interesting about this account is not the laudable effort of an individual, but that it was deemed noteworthy, and that the story reports it as if he was the lone gunslinger coming into town to clear out the riffraff (in fact, the story started with: “He might have resembled Clint Eastwood in a spaghetti western, packing six-shooters ready to save the town, except that he wore a Dave Matthews Band T-shirt, shorts and hiking boots”). In other words, this person’s efforts were understood as the actions of a lone hero, not as those of an individual responding to a community. His comment: "There are people sitting inside their houses and doing nothing," he said. "If you're able to help, I think that you should."

Despite his plea, most of the official media in Orlando encouraged people to do exactly the

opposite. In spite of the occasional narrative of individual heroism, there was a kind of enforced and officially mandated passivity. If you tuned in to the radio or read the paper, the message you got was that you were supposed to do nothing. Do not touch anything, do not use the water, do not drive around unnecessarily. Do not eat the food in your fridge, do not do anything to make matters worse. Do not ask when your power will come back on, and do not question when those across the street get their power within hours after the hurricane, while you wait for days. The response to the disaster in Orlando might have been well planned, but one result of that planning was that people were generally discouraged from coming together as a community, and were in the process encouraged to isolate themselves and wait for professional help.

The *Orlando Sentinel* asked and answered the question of public involvement most directly in the title to a story: “Best Way To Help? Stay Out of the Way.”<sup>4</sup> Most of the story discouraged public involvement by describing its rigorous requirements and making clear that “[t]he call for help is not an invitation to send garage-sale junk to the needy,” as if there had been any call for help at all, and as if the first thing potentially generous people needed to know was how to not be generous. The story did go on to add that if a person was willing to help, the best way would be to give money, turning a potential community-building opportunity into an anonymous economic exchange.<sup>5</sup> The contrast to a story in the *Ft. Myers News-Press* titled simply “List of Relief Efforts”<sup>6</sup> is quite remarkable – instead of discouraging donations and framing legitimate response as solely official, the *News-Press* story listed places that would accept a range of goods, and managed to portray government, local business, and community as equally mobilized and engaged. No single group was portrayed as the only or official solution to the problem, and the potential of community was not only recognized, but fostered.

Most of the stories in the *Orlando Sentinel* emphasized official help, whether that was local, national, or corporate.<sup>7</sup> The stories of communities helping each other were almost non-existent. GM, for instance, was going to send gasoline-electric hybrid trucks, in a story that looked more like an advertisement than an actual news release.<sup>8</sup> FEMA moved its office to Orlando, emphasizing the speed of federal response.<sup>9</sup> The heroes were mostly official and corporate ones.<sup>10</sup> What was missing in the *Sentinel* was a forum for the community to come together. While the *Sentinel* did run a “chat” weblog, it was difficult to find, poorly organized, not specific to the occasion, and hence little used. Compared to the *Ft. Myers News-Press*, there was almost nothing. The *News-Press* set up forums for a variety of topics, ranging from practical matters to discussions on questions like “Did you hide in a strange place?”, “What strange stuff washed up on your lawn?”, “What belongings did you choose to save?” and “Tell us about acts of kindness you saw.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the newspaper facilitated an active community, and contributed to place-making, rather than framing the events in official terms, contributing to further isolation among the people.

It is worth considering the tone of stories in the *Orlando Sentinel* in the days that followed, because I believe they contributed to the general lack of place-making, as well as the social construction of the event as primarily economic and individualistic. A story on Tuesday, August 17 began as follows:

Utility-company crews had restored electricity by Monday to half of the 1.5 million Central Florida residents who lost power in Hurricane Charley, but this success spawned new anxiety and envy among those still left in the dark.

"We've been hit heavy, and it seems like nobody's been out here," said Jane Sowers, a 41-year-old accountant and customer of Progress Energy Florida in south Seminole County.<sup>12</sup>

Note the implication in these lines. The solution to the problems come from official sources (the utility companies), but those solutions were isolating and ended up being divisive. Abandonment meant abandonment by official actors, not by other people. This particular story has some context: there is a history of suspicion toward Progress Energy in the Orlando area (Winter Park had a referendum in the fall of 2003 in which they decided to drop Progress Energy as the local energy provider<sup>13</sup>). But the beginning of the story establishes in the reader's mind that the solutions are economic ones, dealing with property relations, and that these solutions may not be equitable. Readers are set against other readers, and against the official problem-solvers, even as those official problem-solvers are put forward as the only response to the present crisis. The narrative of conflict is between active and passive agents - the official problem-solvers are ambiguous saviours - they rush to aid, but are perceived to violate principles of distributive justice. The response of the passive agents can only be verbal (the complaint) or emotional (the outburst), since that agent's passivity has been already established. This narrative may sell newspapers (conflict always sells, as does emotion) but it does nothing to foster community or place identity.

The passivity extended to those who were in official capacities of leadership. A couple of examples, again anecdotal. In my apartment complex, about 2/3 of the units had power very quickly after the hurricane, while about a third (including mine) did not for a long time. In most communities, this would have been noticed by both the managers of the complex and those who had power, and some effort to help those without power would have been mounted. Even asking those with power to make ice for those without, or asking people to volunteer laundry facilities, would have been a help. None of this happened, though, and it didn't occur to anyone, as far as I could see. The reaction after this storm

was not a communal one, but an individual one. Individual interests were the primary and in most cases the only consideration.

In fact, the fact that some had power and others didn't was reinforced by the fact that the fountain outside a building which had no power was running within a day of the hurricane (its power must have been on another supply). No one thought that it might be symbolic, that it might appear that having a fountain running was more important than helping those without power. One person in another part of town realized the symbolic force of her technology:

The night her lights came back on, Darla Smith returned from a walk past the homes without electricity in her storm-ravaged Orlando neighborhood and was appalled to see her brightly lighted chandelier shining through the foyer window.

"I thought, 'Now there's a beacon of hate. I have to turn that off,' " said Smith, 49. "I try to keep my lights on low, because it's really not fair."<sup>4</sup>

Another anecdote: A new colleague found herself in a local hotel, because she was in the area for orientation to her new job. When the storm hit, the power went out. The hotel staff deemed it an "act of God", and as such, they refused to help the residents in any way. They did not even replace depleted emergency light batteries. There was no community, even a fleeting or virtual one, which the managers could see or which they felt they might have any membership in. Interestingly, the lack of power forced people into the lobby, where they exchanged news and rumours. It became the LNN: the Lobby News Network. People did, in fact, help each other with flashlights, food, and other necessities, but the opportunity for the staff of the hotel to be part of that community was not even realized, much less acted upon.

As before, these anecdotes are not meant to be generalized. While there are examples this kind

of official passivity, there are also examples of groups delivering material aid. Churches fed people who had been displaced, as well as workers. Disney offered to contribute to the hotel costs for employees who had been displaced. Banks and other businesses helped their employees. And, there are many stories of neighbours helping each other. So, when I speak of officially mandated passivity, I do not mean that no one helped anyone, because that is not true. These anecdotes are not meant to be generalized. What I mean is that the disaster was constructed in such a way as to discourage or ignore such efforts, in favour of officially mandated responses.<sup>15</sup> When spontaneous communities did form in various neighborhoods, they formed in spite of the official construction of the events, rather than in response to it.

By August 19, a few stories started appearing in the *Sentinel* which seemed to suggest there was community spirit and place-making. Even these, though, need to be understood as something other than stories that encourage place-making. Aside from the fact that these appeared five days after the first newspaper reports publically constructed the proper response to the hurricane, the stories themselves can be read as something other than place-making stories. For example, a story titled “Generating Good Will”<sup>16</sup> seemed to be about a community coming together, but in fact was a story about the cleverness of the (upscale) inhabitants in having purchased a generator for the community last year. The writer emphasizes the bourgeois comforts that these residents could continue to enjoy:

Super and Murray brought margaritas. Churchill Thompson whipped up shrimp in a garlic-curry sauce. Kelley Gangle baked her secret-family-recipe crumb cake. The next night it was Mediterranean pasta with calamata olives, chickpeas and chicken, a mixed green salad with feta and goat cheese, and hot-chocolate croissants for dessert. This -- while half of Orlando hunted for an open McDonald's.

There was also column on August 19 that praised Orlando's cohesiveness as a community.<sup>17</sup> What was remarkable about the article was that not a single example was given of this community cohesiveness. The article echoed the received wisdom about disasters, which is that people come together and community is enhanced. As I have argued, it is unclear that this actually happened, and even if it did, the construction of events supported a different conclusion. August 19 brought the first column about citizens' donations, which had been organized by a radio station and local businesses.<sup>18</sup> Promotion of these charity efforts was a step toward place-making, but after five days of discouraging or ignoring such activities, it seemed a small contribution to place, amidst the continuing stories of official salvation for passive citizens. When the *Sentinel* organized their hurricane stories on a daily basis (a useful thing to do), they subtitled August 22's coverage as "Neighbor helps neighbor as the recovery process continues."<sup>19</sup> This was more than a week after the hurricane, when one might expect that the "hard" news had all been done, but even at that point, surprisingly few of the stories on the page bore the theme of community response (although some did deal with individual heroism or generosity, which is not the same as place-making).

Why might this narrative of passivity developed, particularly in contrast to events in Kenya at the time of the embassy bombing? The emergency infrastructure in North America is far superior to that of Kenya, both in terms of equipment and in terms of training for personnel, and this may mean that people become accustomed to official solutions to their problems. But there is another reason. Kenyans have a tradition of community support which remains strong even as people move from rural tribal areas into Nairobi. Normally that support is shown towards one's own extended ethnic group, but in an emergency that ethnic solidarity can easily encompass a nation. Kenyans have the tradition of

“Harambee”, or coming together, usually to support local causes. The Harambee has ritualized elements - a ceremony, a showy donation of money initiated by prominent people, who issue challenges to others as they wave their contributions above their heads. There is a kind of place-making in all this, usually a joyous one as people contribute to the building of churches or community halls, but also sometimes grim ones as people come together in grief.

People living in Orlando tend not to be close to ethnic or other communities (the exception might be retirees who come from other parts of the US and have informal “Michigan clubs” or “New York clubs”), nor are there many rituals similar to the Harambee that would reinforce the significance of communal place. A high percentage of inhabitants of Orlando are recent arrivals (myself included), whose allegiances and histories are elsewhere. There is, therefore, little experienced and shared community that could be extended to a larger group.<sup>20</sup> This is not true of all people in Orlando, of course, and some who have lived there longer or who have identifiable communities may have had the place-making skills necessary to be less than passive. But Orlando has largely constructed itself economically, as a tourist destination, and tourist consumption forms a large part of its self-understanding. While there is an economic element in the Harambee (monetary contributions to a cause), the events are not understood in terms of consumption, but in terms of community building.

Past the lack of place-making skills, though, I also want to argue that there was a lack of media support for such community in Orlando. Events were framed in official terms, rather than community terms. Individual help to others was discouraged both by lack of coverage and also by active discouragement. One story, in fact, even pathologized the impulse to excessive help as “survivor’s guilt”,<sup>21</sup> despite the fact that there was little evidence of the excessive compulsion to help. There is, then,

a double incentive to be passive - the tendency to highlight official specialization of responders, and an unofficial lack of place-making skills by relatively recent residents.

In pointing out the passivity, it is important to note that I am not advocating that people should just barge in and get in the way of official work crews. The point is one of social construction, not of action - opportunities for building community were simply made unavailable by both official and unofficial sources, rendering people not only passive but also undermining the possibility of place-creation at one of the best times that it could happen. While Orlando's roots stretch into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this is only an effective or lived truth for a very tiny minority of current residents. Almost everyone in Orlando came from somewhere else, and as such, has little invested in the place. Furthermore, the avenues for place-making are difficult to identify for a newcomer. In other places, newcomers can see the civic spirit of those for whom their place is their place, and find ways to participate. If almost everyone is a newcomer, though, or feels in some way transient, from whom can anyone watch and learn?

There is another aspect of the tragedy which seems to contribute to overall passivity, and that has to do with the social construction of the event as essentially an economic tragedy. When the tragedy is human, as was the case in Nairobi, it is much easier to come together as humans. When the tragedy is framed as one against property, though, especially in the US where property is seen as an individual attribute, it is more likely that people look out for themselves rather than each other. The assumption of economic exchange could be felt in Orlando even before the storm came. There were many radio and television stories on how to prepare for hurricanes. It was notable, though, that specific stores were identified as sources of these supplies. Instead of telling people to go to a hardware or home

improvement store, people were directed to go to Home Depot or Loews.<sup>22</sup> No doubt these large national chains did very well in the run-up to the hurricane, while other equally good but more local stores would have been passed over.

One of the first and most persistent messages in the media was that price gouging would not be tolerated.<sup>23</sup> People were encouraged to report those who they believed were raising prices opportunistically. Again the tragedy is put in economic terms rather than human ones.<sup>24</sup> The concern may be a legitimate one, but it does frame the event in a particular manner. Specifically, it makes it into an issue of individual exchange rather than communal meaning. Price gouging is an affront to the individual, not to the group, and certainly not to any group that might form spontaneously in response to the tragedy. As well, since the tragedy was economic, a central fear was the disruption of the legitimate economic structures by “scam artists”. While no one wants to be taken advantage of, it is noteworthy that the potential problem was given a higher profile in the *Sentinel*, which framed the disaster as economic, than in the *News-Press*, which framed the disaster differently, as one of community rather than property.<sup>25</sup> And, there were many stories about the possibility of looting, even though these stories tended to be about fears of looting rather than actual reports of it.<sup>26</sup> Focusing on the fear of looters tends to create anxiety over one’s property, and plays the economic values against community values. The message of the price gouging, scam artist, and looting articles is that one’s neighbours (or strangers in general) are not to be trusted, an attitude which hardly opens one up to the possibility of place-making.

The economic nature of the tragedy is underscored by the speed with which officials “re-opened” Florida for tourist business.<sup>27</sup> While the governor made a pro forma statement about the need

to “be sensitive” to those who had suffered tragedy, the message was that the real tragedy was economic, and the way out of it was to attract tourists. And, the need to be sensitive was interpreted economically by those in the tourist board: “Tourism executives agreed that it is important not to trumpet the state too loudly, in part because hurricane season is still under way and more threats could arise quickly and prompt the need for even more emergency ad spending later on.” In other words, the real problem is not that peoples’ trials might be trivialized by a rush back to economic business as usual, but that the effort could backfire if another disaster occurred. The economic again trumps the human.

It is worth noting in passing that the story in which Governor Jeb Bush spoke of being sensitive, he also made one of the only calls I was able to locate in the *Sentinel* for community involvement. The story ends with the sentence, ascribed to the governor, that “ it is time for Floridians to "roll up the sleeves" and help in any way possible.” No details were given as to what kind of help might be possible, and in fact, one would not be any more clear about this in any other reports in the newspaper or on the radio.

The political “optics” of the situation were not lost on some observers. 2004 is an election year, and Florida is a swing state, governed by the brother of the president. The question was raised in at least one story:

The Republican governor denied his decision to visit heavily Hispanic Poinciana was based on political calculations, though winning support in the area could be doubly important in the November presidential election. His brother President Bush and Democratic candidate Sen. John Kerry are wooing the crucial Hispanic vote, and Poinciana is part of the Interstate 4 corridor where both nominees are waging a fierce battle.<sup>28</sup>

The relatively low profile that was given to political issues in Hurricane Charley is noteworthy. The previous major hurricane which hit Florida, Hurricane Andrew in 1992, also hit in an election year,

when the previous President Bush was finishing off a first term and running for a second. Michael Salwen did a quantitative analysis of stories at a local and national level to identify the kinds of sources used and the resulting stories that were told.<sup>29</sup> He was particularly interested in the relationship between local and federal bodies, and found a great deal of tension. Individuals, local, and state officials quoted in stories tended to praise other individuals or local or state officials rather than federal agencies. (835)

It is no surprise that Hurricane Andrew became a political issue in 1992, when there was a Republican president and a Democratic governor (Lawton M. Chiles, Jr.), and did not become a political issue in 2004 when the president and governor were not only from the same party but from the same family as well. Instead of vilification of official sources of aid, the *Sentinel* depicted those sources as the solution to the problems that the hurricane created.

Despite my argument that the opportunity to create place was not taken, it is worth noting that there was a kind of simulated place creation that occurred. As one might expect when simulated places are being discussed, Disney was involved. They had employees stay on site the evening of the hurricane, and they began cleanup immediately after the storm subsided. They managed to open three of the four parks the next day, only two hours late (at 9:30 a.m.). Many hotels in the area had been adversely affected. There is a kind of corporate logic to this - when everything else is closed, the place which is open can make a lot of money. There was also no doubt a human logic here as well - visitors had come from far away, paying a lot of money for their one week in the sun, and would be annoyed if some of that was taken away (or perhaps, pleasantly surprised if Disneyworld managed to open so quickly after a devastating event). But it is not the logic that I am interested in, but rather the image of devastation all around while the colourful plastic world of Disney remained intact. It truly must be the

Magic Kingdom, to seemingly survive the disaster that laid everything else in the area low. And those who are drawn there (by all accounts, the park was packed) can withdraw from reality into fantasy, safely oblivious to the immediate tragedy and loss.

It might be tempting to think of the aftermath of the disaster in psychological terms. Indeed, several newspaper story framed it in those terms.<sup>30</sup> These psychological accounts tended to frame the events in cause and effect terms – the hurricane caused a variety of stress-related conditions, and counselors were ready and willing to explain how to deal with these conditions. The reports tended to frame the human effects of the storm in individual terms, rather than in collective terms. My interest, though, is in the way place is made socially available, not in a psychological account of why people act as they do. I start with some observations, but the point is not to explain peoples' behaviour but to try to account for how those who have the power to make sense of the events do so, and how these meanings solidify power relationships between state structures and individuals. The question is, is place made available in this dramatic set of events, and if so, how. There were stories about peoples' reactions to the events<sup>31</sup>, but only one of these stories had to do with community or place-making, and it was about patching up long-standing grudges while removing a fallen tree.<sup>32</sup>

The point of all this is that an opportunity for place-making presented itself, and was largely lost as the tragedy was constructed as an event to be handled by experts and to be thought of as primarily economic. One colleague mused that the difference between this event and the events of 9/11 was that 9/11 was far worse, in a way that forced people to rely on each other. That event had to be constructed as human, even though the economic loss was vast. This hurricane, bad as it was, was not bad enough in terms of the loss of life (placed at 22 across Florida as I write this, spread across many

places) to cause people to turn to each other. In fact, while there was a loss of property, another colleague thought that she noticed a kind of excitement in some people, as if the chaos was a welcome break in an otherwise boring existence.

The Nairobi attack was a time when, however briefly, community was reinforced, and the skills of place-making were exercised. The reaction to Hurricane Charley in Orlando, on the other hand, tended not to reinforce community, and tended not to contribute to place-making. Neither of these exists without exception – people looted and looked out for themselves in Nairobi, people helped others and built community in some places in Orlando – but as comparative statements these seem to ring true. While it is extremely difficult to measure sense of place or sense of community quantitatively, it is possible to make sense out of the interpretive tools people have at their disposal in a disaster. In this, I argue, one need not go as far away as Nairobi. One only has to compare the treatments of the same hurricane in the Orlando and the Ft. Myers newspapers.

What comes out of all this, I think, is something I want to call “place-making imagination”. This is analogous to the concept of “moral imagination” in ethics. Our moral options extend as far as our imagination will allow. A person might boil the moral universe down to polarized options – fight or flight, kill or be killed, choose A or B – when in fact a more cultivated and aware imagination may have afforded other options, perhaps better ones than either polarized one. But where does moral imagination come from? Under what conditions does it have the maximum possible reach? And, do people bear moral responsibility for their lack of imagination? We might think about education, openness to otherness and difference, tolerance, and other virtues as contributing to moral imagination.

Place-making imagination is similar. Under what conditions can place be made? Only under

those conditions in which it can be imagined. If the socially legitimated frame of reference for an event precludes such imagination, one ends up with emaciated places. These places function on the most reductionist, individualist, and materialist terms because no other options can be imagined.

My interest is in the ways in which events make places available, for better or worse. Dramatic events hold forth the promise of both showing places for what they are, but also of making new places available. This is why we memorialize dramatic events in material ways. We create places where there were none before, or where they have now become available. If the effect of Hurricane Charley will be memorialized, it seems clear to me that Ft. Myers will do that long before Orlando does, because the hurricane showed something of the place, or lack of place, in each locale. In Orlando it is more likely that, once peoples' lives have returned to normal and the city has been cleaned up, Hurricane Charley will be forgotten until it can be used as the yardstick for efficient official response at the next disaster.

## **Part Two: Frances**

Three weeks after Hurricane Charley, on September 4, 2004, Hurricane Frances appeared on the east coast of Florida. Frances was a much larger hurricane, with cloud cover the size of Texas and winds higher than Charley. It also moved much more slowly, which meant that the destructive force had longer to act over land. Florida state officials enacted the largest evacuation in the state's history in the days prior to Frances' landfall.<sup>33</sup>

The construction of this second hurricane was framed by the first. People were weary from the first - insurance claims from Charley were still being addressed, and a great deal of debris had yet to be cleared from curbs. Orlando in particular stood to take heavy damage a second time. In fact, Frances

did not cause as much physical damage as Charley (the slow movement meant that the coast was hit much harder than Orlando, 60 miles inland), but with a weakened infrastructure, any more damage was too much. It is interesting to note the differences in the public construction of the second hurricane, and to theorize about why these differences may have occurred. Again, these reflections are not based on a sociological analysis of the responses of the public, but on an analysis of media sources in their construction of the second event.

There was a subtle change in the stories leading up to this second hurricane. The construction of the first hurricane was in anonymous official terms; in the second case, there was still a framing of the response as official, but officialdom started to have a face. In “City Workers Leave Their Desks to Pitch In”<sup>34</sup>, the response to the threat is shown to be more personal and more community oriented. The mayor urged individuals to help:

Mayor Buddy Dyer urged residents with pickups to help clear their streets of branches before Hurricane Frances can turn them into projectiles. Many heeded the call. By early afternoon, Schaefer said, nearly a hundred residents had dumped loads at just one of three collection sites the city has established.

This plea, and its response, stands in contrast to the official framing of the earlier hurricane, and the resulting message to the community that passivity was the best response.

As the disaster progressed, the difference in coverage in the *Sentinel* became more apparent. For one thing, the weblog which was previously hidden and ineffective became a central feature of the website.<sup>35</sup> It contained stories by *Sentinel* staff about people and how they coped with the hurricane. There were fewer stories which framed the disaster in terms of property alone. People were not encouraged to remain passive, and fewer stories framed the response in solely official terms. While not

many specific ideas were given as to how a person could participate, the picture of the storm was one that had assailed the community as a whole, not simply individuals or their economic interests.

There were also some stories about communities coming together. “Bowling Alley Rides Out Storm”<sup>36</sup>, for instance, profiled a local business that had a history of providing refuge for local people. “Bar Owner Bounces Back to Feed Fellow Islanders” told the story of Patty McGee, who stayed near her bar and restaurant and was able to open when there was no other food on the island.<sup>37</sup> While these stories were still relatively rare, they did exist.

There were still plenty of stories about property damage due to Frances, but it was notable that there was less emphasis on disruptions to the economic order, in the form of price gouging, scam artists and looters. It is particularly notable since more looters were reported after Frances than were reported after Charley. These activities were treated as crimes after Frances, rather than as threats.

Why did the tone of the coverage in the *Sentinel* change from one hurricane to the next? There are some obvious answers to that. First, Charley was the first real hurricane Orlando had endured for decades. To some extent, the editorial staff had to learn how to report a hurricane to their own community. Frances came in Charley’s wake, and it is quite possible that the news staff had time to reflect on the overall impression of the stories by the time they had to report on Frances. And, as one journalist for the *Sentinel* mentioned to me, both the staff and the public after Charley were suffering from “hurricane fatigue”. Reporting on Frances in those conditions may have allowed some interpretive shift to occur.

### **Part Three: Ivan**

...more to come...

## ENDNOTES

1.Thanks to several friends and colleagues for observations about the Orlando hurricane, including Mason Cash, Marilyn Harder, Theo Lotz, Lisa Roney, Claudia Schippert, and Jennifer Lisa Vest.

2.[E]xtreme events...are marked by “an excessiveness which allows us better to perceive the facts than in those places where, although no less essential, they still remain small-scale and involuted.” Eric Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002: 23.

3.Pamela J. Johnson. “Hero of Berwick Street” *Orlando Sentinel* August 18, 2004.

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-asechhero18081804aug18.0.1011889.story>

4.”Best Way To Help? Stay Out of the Way.” *Orlando Sentinel* August 17, 2004.

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-hguide-story18053004.0.7522946.story> For a full list of

*Orlando Sentinel* stories on Hurricane Charley, see

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-charley-gallery.0.6368907.storygallery>

5.The same message was given in another story titled “Here’s How to Find Help, Help Others”

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-asechqa17081704aug17.0.1490194.story>

6.n.a., “List of Relief Efforts”, *Ft. Myers News-Press*, August 18, 2004

<http://www.news-press.com/news/weather/hurricane/stories/reliefforts.html>. For a full list of stories from the

*Ft. Myers News-Press* on the hurricane, go to

<http://www.news-press.com/news/weather/hurricane/index.html>

7.For all the Hurricane Charley coverage from the *Orlando Sentinel*, go to

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-charley-gallery.0.5070731.storygallery>

8.Steven Cole Smith, “GM Trucks Could Deliver Power.” *Orlando Sentinel* August 17, 2004.

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-asechpickups17081704aug17.0.7973738.story>

9.And, in contrast to the tension between state and federal bodies during Hurricane Andrew in 1992, local officials were quick to downplay divisions in favor of creating a single official response: "I think the response we received from state and federal officials has been very timely, very accurate and reliable," [County Manager Mike Herr] said. Bob Mahlburg, “FEMA Moves Workers to Orlando Today.” *Orlando Sentinel* August 17, 2004.

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-asechhelp17081704aug17.0.2480181.story>

10. David Damron, "Grit Shines on Grinding Day", *Orlando Sentinel*, Tuesday, August 17, 2004.  
<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-asechpowerprofile17081704aug17.0.1508689.story>

11. <http://www.news-press.com/news/weather/hurricane/index.html>

12. Dan Tracy and Debbie Salamone, "Few Lights but Many Questions." *Orlando Sentinel* August 17, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-asechpowermain17081704aug17.0.6697462.story>

13. One writer did make the connection, jokingly, between the Winter Park vote and the perceived slowness in bringing back their power. Mike Thomas, "Rumors of Coffee Conspiracy Percolate", August 17, 2004.

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-asechthomas17081704aug17.0.2112223.column>

14. Jeff Kunerth, Rich McKay and Tania deLuzuriaga. "Recovery Divides Those With Power, Those Without" *Orlando Sentinel* August 18, 2004.

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-asechcopemain18081804aug18.0.2546898.story>

15. One story suggests that there was help between strangers, though, amidst reports of jealousy between those who have utilities and those who do not. See Kunerth et. al. "Recovery Divides Those With Power, Those Without"

16. Kate Santich, "Generating Good Will" *Orlando Sentinel* August 19, 2004.

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-livneighbors19081904aug19.0.6256014.story>

17. Tanny L. Carter, "Why Does Calamity Bring Out Our Best?" *Orlando Sentinel* August 19, 2004. E1, E10.

18. Henry Pierson Curtis, "Central Floridians boost nonprofits in relief effort" *Orlando Sentinel* August 19, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-asechcharity19081904aug19.0.2735454.story>

19. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-charley-gallery-day11.0.5835426.storygallery>

20. I realize that it is ironic to claim that coming from another place undermines place-making skills. Most of the time, the opposite occurs. Immigrants or refugees often find those who come from the same area of the world as they do, and form communities. My hunch, which has yet to be substantiated, is that this happens less in Orlando. A study could be performed on the level of place attachment people ascribe to Orlando, correlating it with their reasons for coming to Orlando in the first place. I would hypothesize that people would come to Orlando for a specific job, or the weather, as opposed to coming for a community, and that those who came for those reasons would also demonstrate less place attachment than others.

21. The actual quotation is: "People suffering survivor's guilt often push themselves to the limit trying to help." n.a. "Shock triggers emotional roller coaster" *Orlando Sentinel* August 18, 2004.

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-hguide-story16053004.0.6605440.story>

- 22.Thanks to Lisa Roney for pointing this out. For a Home Depot story from after the hurricane, see Terry O. Roen, “Hundreds Rush In To Relieve Colleagues” *Orlando Sentinel* August 21, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-bizhdepot21082104aug21.0.3318359.story>
- 23.John Kennedy, “AG sues two hotels for price-gouging”, *Orlando Sentinel*, August 17, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-bk-gouging081704.0.3431002.story>
- 24.I am fully aware that this contrast is a problematic one for many, that in fact economic activity is the quintessentially human activity for followers of Adam Smith and others (to be human is to trade). I will stand by the contrast, however, since I wish to argue that framing the disaster in terms of property stands against other interpretive frames, and tends to undermine place-making in anything but the most limited sense. The point is not that property should be ignored, but that it should not be the framing principle.
- 25.See, for example, Greg Dawson, “Here are Ways to Spot Scam Artists”, *Orlando Sentinel*, August 17, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-asec-gougecolumn081704.0.3681755.column>
- 26.See, for example, Dorimar Mercado, “We Have to Watch Over Our Property” *Orlando Sentinel* August 19, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-bizhmechanic19081904aug19.0.3552871.story>
- 27.Jerry W. Jackson. “Message to Tourists: Come Visit.” *Orlando Sentinel* August 17, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-bizhtourism17081704aug17.0.5946688.story>
- 28.Willoughby Mariano, “Sweaty residents share frustrations with governor” *Orlando Sentinel* August 18, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-asechbush18081804aug18.0.5664949.story>
- 29.Michael B. Salwen, “News of Hurricane Andrew: The Agenda of Sources and the Sources’ Agenda” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 72:4 (Winter 1995): 826-840.
30. Linda Shrieves, “Anger, Loss of Patience Perfectly Normal” *Orlando Sentinel* August 16, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-asechanxiety16081604aug16.0.1573012.story>. See also Robyn Shelton, “In storm’s wake, sleeping problems rise” *Orlando Sentinel* August 19, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-asechsleep19081904aug19.0.36926.story> and Robyn Shelton, “Talking, resting can ease mental strain” *Orlando Sentinel* August 20, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-asechmental20082004aug20.0.4182943.story>
31. “Storming the Senses.” *Orlando Sentinel*, August 17, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-liv-stormsenses-081604.0.3333342.storygallery>
- 32.Jean Patterson, “Hard Feelings” *Orlando Sentinel*, August 16, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/local/state/orl-livefeelings16081604aug16.0.655499.story>

33.For full *Orlando Sentinel* Hurricane Frances coverage, see  
<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-frances-gallery.1.269972.storygallery?>

34.Mark Schlueb, “City Workers Leave Desks To Pitch In” *Orlando Sentinel*, September 3, 2004.  
<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-asechdebris03090304sep03.0.4908447.story?>

35.It is worth noting that the newspapers’ websites were an important source of information. “At OrlandoSentinel.com, traffic doubled Thursday and continued above normal throughout the weekend, said Anthony Moor, editor of the Sentinel’s Web site.” Aline Mendelsohn, “Papers Work Around Storm.” *Orlando Sentinel* September 6, 2004.  
<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-asechmedia06090604sep06.1.4108202.story?>

36.Christine Slewinski, “Bowling Alley Rides Out Storm” *Orlando Sentinel*, September 4, 2004.  
<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-bk-bowling090505.1.7307916.story?>

37.Roger Roy, “Bar Owner Bounces Back to Feed Fellow Islanders” *Orlando Sentinel* September 7, 2004. <http://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/weather/orl-asechhutch07090704sep07.0.3313732.story?>