

A hammer and a prayer: How to rebuild a city

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [February 10, 2009](#) issue

In January I went to New Orleans with the Protestant Cooperative Ministry of Cornell University to work on a Habitat for Humanity project. My wife, Jeanene, and I drove from San Antonio through Houston and on to New Orleans to meet Taryn Mattice, the campus minister, and 17 students. As it turned out, our journey through Houston helped us to understand the work we were about to do.

I grew up on the west side of Houston, 15 miles out Interstate 10, near Katy, Texas. Our exit had nothing more than a Shell station, a small grocery store and a few shops. There wasn't much on the highway between Katy and Houston either, mostly open country and a few familiar roads. I drove into Houston regularly to visit friends and sack groceries in a little store near Kirkwood Street. My girlfriend lived off Wilcrest Road. My best friend lived near Westheimer and I-10. This was in the late 1970s.

As Jeanene and I drove through Katy, I was shocked to find that Houston has expanded to the point where you can't tell where Katy begins and ends. The exit to our old neighborhood is a major freeway interchange with hundreds of restaurants and businesses nearby. What was once lonely highway is filled with subdivisions, car dealerships and multistoried office buildings. The only old place I recognized was the Shell station, though it was hard to spot amidst the clutter of new buildings and strip malls. I was comforted by its presence, as if it were my last old friend. While we drove I created a running narrative of all that had been lost. My wife listened patiently.

"This is unbelievable. None of this was here back then. See those restaurants? They weren't there. Where is the old Addick's bank? I think the grocery store used to be right there by that parking garage. Why are these giant, looping overpasses here? Where's Wilcrest? Where's Westheimer?"

Eventually I fell silent. My grief was not intense, but it felt old and deep. I felt vaguely guilty, as though I had abandoned a garden and had returned to find it overgrown with weeds. My parents had left Houston shortly after I went to college, and I don't have any friends there anymore. You would think this would lessen my grief, but it did not. Perhaps when we lose relationship connections, the buildings and roads and familiar sights become more important. We like to know that the place is there even if the people are gone.

What a powerful foreshadowing this was for the work we were about to do in New Orleans, and for encountering the grief of those who've lost homes, a grief that we could only try to understand. Where once there were old neighborhoods filled with life and energy and rich history, now there are naked foundations and front steps that lead nowhere. My friend Lee Gomez came to San Antonio from New Orleans after Katrina. Her house and neighborhood had been destroyed. She went back once, and the sight of her ruined neighborhood filled her with such sorrow that I doubt she'll ever go back again.

While apparently a piece of my heart still lives in the Houston of 1978, I think about three-quarters of Lee's heart still lives in pre-Katrina New Orleans. I don't know how she copes with the sorrow.

Yes, people are rebuilding New Orleans, but rebuilding a city is too big a thing to comprehend. I don't know how to think about such a large job. But I do know how to pick up a hammer and go to work. When we got to New Orleans I found that my energy for work grew as we drove past streets full of blackened homes with caved-in roofs and search-and-rescue markings still visible on the front doors. When we finally got to our Habitat site, I couldn't wait to get a hammer in my hand. When you don't know how to deal with big things, working on small things can be good therapy. That kind of work is like a prayer. You feel the presence of God in the work. We worked on three houses in a modest neighborhood with people from New Orleans who didn't know any more about the big picture than we did. But while we were working, none of us were asking the big questions. And we were happy.

At one point, a battered car pulled up with a man, woman and child inside. It looked like everything they owned was in the back seat. They were cruising the streets of New Orleans, hoping to find a place they could call home. They asked if we were building low-income housing. I told them we were with Habitat for Humanity.

“You apply for a home, and if accepted you get an interest-free mortgage,” I said. “The people who will live in these houses will own them.”

“We could own a home?” the woman said. She shook her head from side to side while she said it, as if she couldn’t believe such a thing could be true. You would have thought I was giving her directions to the Promised Land.

“God bless you,” said the man. “God bless you, brothers and sisters. We’re calling Habitat tomorrow and see what we can do.”

I felt very sad and unworthy of his blessing. I don’t know if they will be accepted for a Habitat home. There are so many in need, and even though Habitat in New Orleans has built more homes in the last year than they have in their entire history in New Orleans, they still aren’t enough. So I felt bad. I felt bad for about five minutes until I got my hammer back in my hand. When my body was moving and I was working my prayers, I could hear the comforting words of God:

“Don’t worry about the city of New Orleans. You just work hard on these three homes that I have put into your care. Work hard on this small task, and I will take care of the big picture. Someday my children will find the Promised Land.”