



Vanessa's Garage

Learning from New Orleans

Houses, schools, and whole neighborhoods were destroyed when Hurricane Katrina came to New Orleans, Louisiana, in 2005. The levees that had been built to hold back the water were not up to the task. People had to leave the city for their safety. Thousands took shelter in public places. Some people died. And then it was time to clean up. So many had lost so much!

One group that came to help was led by Reverend Mary Harrington, the minister of a UU congregation in Massachusetts. She named the group "Long Haul" to show the volunteers' commitment. Here is a story she told:

For our second trip, we volunteered for Project HOPE in St. Bernard Parish, which was completely flooded, often to 10 or 12 feet. Project HOPE's large, hand-painted sign was the first thing I saw. Yellow with red lettering, it read, "Project HOPE: Helping Other People with Everything." My heart did a little back flip and I thought, "That's what I want to do, too."

Long Haul encourages volunteers to reach out with interest and kindness to everyone: rental car employees, school security guards, checkers at



the supermarket, tollbooth money takers, children on the playground. "Everyone" is why we are there, and helping with "everything" is what we are willing to do. In St. Bernard's, many of the residents we met were exhausted, discouraged, or even in despair. Listening to people's stories can be healing.

Just showing up can restore a little of their faith in humanity. Which brings me to Vanessa's garage.

A school counselor, Vanessa confided to us that her house was still a mess and she was still living in a FEMA trailer. Besides her own situation, the weight of so many serious problems brought to her by the children, parents, and staff at her school caused her to feel overwhelmed. She just didn't know

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The Families pages are adapted from Tapestry of Faith lifespan faith development programs.

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where to start. She was stuck.

Work on Vanessa's house had started, but her garage full of damaged items was driving her crazy. It needed to be cleaned out. The Long Haul volunteers who went to take a look thought the project might be too small to bother with. Maybe an hour's worth of work.

Small it might be, we reassured the volunteers, but it's what she asked for. So back they went the next day, contractor-size trash bags in hand. When Vanessa came home that afternoon, she went wild. She couldn't believe we'd done all that work. Her garage had never been so clean! After she said thank you about a dozen times, she said, "Do y'all mow lawns? Because I really need to get my grass cut."

And that last question brought me such joy, because it said that Vanessa had gotten unstuck. She was moving on. That little tiny project, exactly what she knew she needed most, got done. After three and a half years she could check it off the list and go right on to the next thing. She could even ask for help with that next thing.

No one really knows what someone else needs unless you ask and then listen carefully. Once you find out, it's crucial to respond as precisely as possible. Good-fitting help can put a smile on someone's face, light up their eyes, even bring a shriek of pure delight.

You may think I am describing the response of the person who got helped, and I am. But good-fitting help puts a smile on my face, too. And I've seen it light up the eyes of scores of volunteers. Good-fitting help makes your heart sing.

Adapted with permission of Rev. Sam Teitel, son of the author, from "Vanessa's Garage" in UU World, Spring 2009 by Rev. Mary J. Harrington (1952-2010).

EXPLORING TOGETHER

What do you know about New Orleans, Louisiana?

Birthplace of jazz.



Home of spectacular Mardi Gras parades.



Like any place, New Orleans has its stories and people. What can we learn from them?

Southernmost port of the Mississippi River.

The site of massive floods in 2005, from which the city and its people have not fully recovered.



A French Twist

When settlers came from France 400 years ago, they gave places new names. "New Orleans" shows nostalgia for the (old) Orleans in their homeland. "Louisiana" honors a French king. Over generations and immigrations, New Orleans kept traces of the French settlers' language and their Catholic religion. Neighborhoods are still called "parishes," a word that implies all the neighbors worship at their local, Catholic parish church.

Mardi Gras, which means "Fat Tuesday" in French, is part of a Catholic way to celebrate Easter. The city hosts one huge party before Ash Wednesday begins the solemn season of Lent. In New Orleans, Mardi Gras is a citywide tradition. People of all faiths and cultures like to take part.



The fleur-de-lis is a symbol of New Orleans from French colonial days.



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In New Orleans, the Long Haul volunteers learned that it's more important to bring listening ears than ready solutions when you take a trip to help someone!

Can you think of a time when you offered to help someone, but found out they needed a different kind of help than you had expected? What did you do then?

What's Your Gumbo?

A favorite stew in New Orleans is gumbo. Recipes are based on okra, celery, and pepper with other, varied ingredients. The word "gumbo" comes from a West African word for okra. New Orleans itself is a blend of cultures, as history has gathered many populations to mingle. First, of course, were indigenous people: the Houma, the Choctaw, and others. Then came Europeans: French and Spanish, who brought Africans as slaves. Descendants of these cultures and more are today's New Orleanians. You may find their spices, meats, and cooking techniques combined in your bowl of gumbo.

What is the "gumbo" where you live? What cultures came together to share your neighborhood or town? What local foods or community celebrations are signs that cultures have blended?



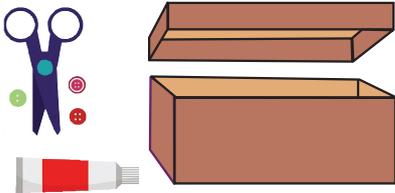
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A Homemade Parade

In New Orleans, schools and youth groups have Mardi Gras parades with shoebox floats that kids make themselves and pull along by a string. Invite some friends or family members to participate!

1 Choose a fun float theme.
 Superheroes? UFOs?
 An animal carnival?
 Blooming flowers of spring?

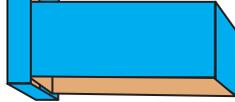
2 Collect supplies.



- A shoebox with a lid
- Large sheets of paper, foil, or gift wrap
- Scissors, glue and tape, markers or paints
- Small toys and dolls, beads, decorations



3 Turn the shoebox upside down and place the lid alongside a short end, like a headboard on a bed.



Cover with paper all the sides that show. Then secure the box and lid together.

4 Decorate!

Arrange and glue items. Add color and drawing. Write your float's name on the side. Attach a string to the front so you can pull your float.



New Life for Old Beads

The members of Mardi Gras krewes spend thousands of dollars every year on souvenirs to throw from their parade floats. Afterward, what happens to all that stuff?

The Arc of Greater New Orleans collects bead necklaces, medallions, stuffed animals, hand-knotted pocket Frisbees, and other items for resale. The project reduces the city's trash, provides jobs for people with disabilities, and saves next year's buyers some money.

Suppose you caught a few dozen bead necklaces at a parade? What could you do with them?



Riverbank Soil to the Rescue

Gasoline fuel used to contain lead. When bus and car traffic released lead into the air, the toxic particles landed everywhere, including playgrounds. Soil with too much lead is dangerous to children.

After Hurricane Katrina, Dr. Howard Mickle, a toxicologist at Tulane University, discovered a way to use fresh riverbank soil from the Mississippi River to cover lead-contaminated soil in children's play areas. New Orleans has already covered 13 parks with this soil.

Can you use science to solve any problems in your community?



Photography © Jolanda Walker

UU Parenting, NOLA-style

“Mardi Gras is basically one of the biggest free parties ever!” says Jolanda Walter of First Church of New Orleans. The mother of two middle-schoolers finds that local traditions offer examples and engagement for her children to live in faith.

Jolanda belongs to the Mystic Krewe of Nyx, the largest all-female New Orleans Mardi Gras krewe (2900+) which “rolls” in an annual parade the Wednesday evening prior to Mardi Gras. As a “rider” on the second story of a tall float, she tosses bead necklaces, toys, doubloons, iPod cases, and Nyx paraphernalia such as hand-decorated purses to people waiting all along the route. “Mardi Gras beads are circular. To me, that’s symbolic of wholeness and unity,” she says. “It’s not about the stuff. It is about giving and receiving. You look into someone’s eyes and try to throw just to them.”

When not rolling with Nyx, Jolanda, her husband, and her children wait at the same spot every year for other krewes to roll by. There’s a lesson there, too: “It is the one time we are all equal. We are all in the street, asking for something (people to throw beads at us!), some in costumes, some in wheelchairs, some catching beads for children. Everyone is out there

being joyful about one thing.”

The spirit of give-and-receive is not only seasonal. Raised in Florida, Jolanda sees New Orleanians helping one another in creative ways. She sometimes buys her family dinner from neighbors who are selling “plates” to raise money for a personal need. The Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice Renewal, housed at Walter’s church, works with partner organizations to improve the city and its people’s lives. Jolanda’s children witness change happening through the efforts of people whom they know, including their mom.

A practice she has begun involves family spending. “Because of the current administration and the movement for Black Lives, as a parent I’ve decided to support minority-owned businesses and ‘buy brown.’ It is very easy to do that in New Orleans,” Jolanda says. As needed, she will boycott, too, and make sure her children and others know why.



Each year, Jolanda Walter’s family dresses up joyfully for Mardi Gras. Top photo: Jolanda, costumed, on her way to roll with Nyx.

Photography © Jolanda Walter



■ Where does give-and-receive occur in your community? How can you and your children take part?



FAMILIES: WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH

Provided by the Faith Development Office of the Unitarian Universalist Association

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Editor, Susan Dana Lawrence
Graphic Design, Ann Casady

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FIND OUT MORE

■ Children can discover New Orleans’ people and culture in picture books. *A Place Where Hurricanes Happen* by Renee Watson, for ages 5-9, conveys the experiences and resilience of New Orleans families in free verse.

■ Throughout this century New Orleans has been a majority black city, and black residents were disproportionately affected by Katrina. To support its black-owned businesses is to help support the city’s recovery. See the dining suggestions gathered for the 2017 UUA General Assembly: www.uuhomestaynola.com.

CORRECTION

In the Families pages of the Spring 2017 *UU World* we shared a story, “The Cellist of Sarajevo.” Though inspired by actual events, our story relied on a fictionalized account with significant embellishments. We apologize for misleading readers.