



is Gaia

A guest editorial
by Kevin Filan

when we need Her most?

it is rare for a *lwa* to take out its anger on an entire community. Still, some have claimed that the bloodshed which has characterized much of Haitian history is the result of calling on the bloodthirsty Petwo Lwa during the revolution.

For the most part, though, Haitians realize that there are some things which are too big even for the *lwa* to handle. When faced with widespread death or famine — a condition with which many Haitians are sadly all too familiar — they respond with a shrug and a fatalistic “*Dèyè mòn gen mòn*” (beyond mountains, there are more mountains) instead of arguments about which *lwa* or deity is responsible for their distress.

Karma: Suffering as Lesson

“Through reincarnation, we are given the opportunity to make good that which may be bad ... Reincarnation, as it manifests within the Law of Karma, is perhaps the greatest demonstration of God’s love for and faith in us.”³

Many people would reject the “God is punishing New Orleans” hypothesis out of hand. They ask why anyone would serve a God who kills innocents to punish a few who ticked Him off. And yet a fair number of those same people would have no problem with explaining suffering by reference to “Karma.” They would reject the idea that God punishes sinners in *this* lifetime but have no problem with the idea of people being punished for sins they committed in a past one.

Although we give lip service to the idea that “all men are created equal,” it is abundantly clear that some people are wealthier than others some have better health, some have greater intelligence, some are stronger and faster. And some have better luck: they avoid things like earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and other potentially deadly forces of nature. There is little apparent correlation between good luck, good health, etc. and morality. Being rich and healthy doesn’t necessarily mean you are a good person;

conversely, being sick and poor doesn’t mean you are bad; and no one has been able to prove that “good” people survive hurricanes better than bad ones. This leaves the question of innocent suffering wide open.

If one accepts the idea of reincarnation, one may also accept the idea that people suffer to atone for crimes they committed in a past life. By enduring these tribulations in this life, they will be free to start their next life with a clean slate. Or one may take a more compassionate view and assume that people voluntarily accept their suffering as a “learning experience.” Through becoming weak and poor, a person may learn greater compassion for her fellows — compassion which will serve her well in her next incarnation. This explanation appears to solve the inequalities of nature. There is no injustice: there is only a deferred payment plan. And this concept features no eternal damnation, rather, there is an upward spiral as people grow and learn from their experiences in many lifetimes.

This idea can be very comforting; it can provide us with a sense of meaning and purpose. If we assent to this belief, we can assert that hurricane victims aren’t dying in vain; they are learning and growing and will have a much better experience in their next lifetime.

But those who are actually doing the suffering may be less impressed by the theory of karma than those who are watching their plight on CNN from the comfort of their living room. Stating that poor people or victims of illness, disaster, or war are going through a “karmic learning experience” raises the inevitable question: what exactly are they supposed to be learning? We don’t educate our children by beating them weeks after they have forgotten their infractions. It is not clear to many why a deity would heap suffering on people for infractions they cannot remember.

At its worst, the concept of karmic suffering can allow us to be smugly self-righteous: since we aren’t suffering, we must have been *really good* in our previous lives. This can (and in the past, has) led societies that embrace such beliefs to develop ossified social structures that actively resist efforts to improve people’s lives on the basis of the argument that “suffering is just their karma.”

Lady of Arizona

I've heard of your forest goddess,
a watery wood nymph with mossy hair,
watching large beasts with Her dark green eyes –

but She is not mine.

Mine
is a desert diva –
so beaming bright She pinks your cheeks,
challenges with heat,
and speaks of survival amongst prickly things.

She's the quiet mover,
the butterflies in my belly,
the wind that jumps wholeheartedly into
multi-colored
canyons.

She teaches patience with thorns,
beauty within scarcity.

She's a sky dweller, who will
without warning,
storm the skies, with blue-gray fury
and lightning eyes.
On arid evenings, she dances
in purple painted sunsets,
whispering softly of remembrance.

Coyote lover,
Sky mother,
Old cactus crone...

She says,
"Baby,
I've been loved, mined, maligne
and redesigned,
but you can see and I can show,
this dry Earth is richer
than you know."

– Rebecca Wolfe

Rethinking Suffering

*"The world only makes sense when you
force it to."*⁴

Both the views I've discussed so far postulate a *purpose* to suffering. A hurricane may be a blow from a vengeful god, or a lesson delivered by a cosmic schoolteacher – but they happen *for a reason*. Humans have an innate need for structure and order – the very things shattered by traumatic events. Believing that there is some kind of larger plan, even a malevolent one, can be less frightening than believing that *nobody* is in charge. A jealous and hot-tempered deity can be propitiated; how does one deal with an uncaring god or a god who cares but who is powerless to help?

In the Vodou cosmology, Bondye (from the French *Bon Dieu*, or "God") created the universe and then turned things over to the saints, angels, and *Iwa*. Bondye is seen as a distant and inapproachable figure. Vodouisants praise Him during the *priye gineh* (Prayer of Gineh, or ancestral Africa) which opens Vodou ceremonies, but they generally don't ask Him for specific favors. They feel that He is so important and so busy that He would not be concerned with your trivial problems. If you wrote to the President of the United States and asked him to fix the pothole outside your driveway, you probably wouldn't even get a response. If, however, you called your city road department, you would have a much better chance. Conversely, the highway department couldn't really help you if a nuclear attack was headed your way. (For that matter, neither could the President. Some problems may be too big for anyone.)

The *Iwa*, saints, and angels (also called the *misté* or "mysteries") are powerful allies, but they answer to a Higher power and their abilities are limited. They may help you get a job, conceive a child, or find a new romantic partner, but they probably can't turn a hurricane around for you.

Many Wiccans and Neopagans honor a form of nature which is "safe": but real nature is not concerned with our individual survival and may not even be concerned with our survival *as a species*. Hurricanes, forest fires, and other natural disasters may be catastrophes to us, but they are a vital part of the Gaiasphere. Hurricanes stir up gathered sediment and flush it from bays which would otherwise become choked and fetid. Forest fires clear the land for new growth. Both kill many of those caught up

in their way, but they also make it possible for life to continue and thrive.

I believe that there may be a larger pattern which governs all these things, but there almost certainly is no smaller pattern involved. There is no Cosmic Timesheet which states "August 29: get coffee, finish intercession budget, strike Gulf Coast with hurricane." Katrina didn't happen because New Orleans was an evil city, or because the folks of New Orleans needed to clean up their karma. Katrina didn't seek out New Orleans; New Orleans just happened to be in its way. The only "meaning" which we can derive from catastrophes is the meaning we create. We can spend time wondering "why did this happen?" But we might be better served in asking ourselves "what are we going to do about it?"

*Where were you? we asked the Iwa.
And the Iwa pointed to reports which said
the levees would break in a storm. They
pointed to centuries of oppression and in-
equality in New Orleans which left many
too poor to leave when the buses stopped
running. They pointed to the damage done
to the wetlands, an underappreciated buf-
fer that might have absorbed much of the
storm surge that swamped the city.*

*Where were you? we asked the Iwa.
And they turned the question right
back at us.*

Backnotes

¹ "New Orleans Residents: God's Mercy Evident in Katrina's Wake" by Jody Brown and Allie Martin. <http://headlines.agapepress.org/archive/9/22005b.asp>. Accessed 10/12/2005.

² "God's reasoning for Katrina far too complex for us" by Richard Roeper. <http://www.suntimes.com/output/roeper/cst-ews-roep13.html>. Accessed 10/12/2005

³ "The Question of Reincarnation, Part 2," <http://www.fst.org/reinc1b.htm>. Accessed 10/12/2005.

⁴ Frank Miller, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, DC Comics, 1997. p. 60. ▲

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