

Too Many T.E.D.s, Crooked Politicians, and Shrimp: The Barriers to Empowerment

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I met Mimi the summer of 2004, when I first started working as a cashier at the New Orleans Museum of Art. I was a junior in high school and needed an easy, air-conditioned, weekend job. Mimi was a middle-aged security guard with a loud mouth and a flair for drama. My boss, my co-workers, and the women in the kitchen all told me not to talk to her. She was weird. She gossiped. She was having an affair with a married man two decades her senior; he was also a Museum security guard and often spontaneously burst into song at inappropriate moments. His name was Bobby. He was usually stationed on the first balcony, and Mimi was always stationed at the front door, so they couldn't talk to each other. Since Mimi couldn't speak with Bobby, she talked to me at the front desk. I, for my part, have had a life-long habit of talking to people with whom most others would not. So, naturally, Mimi and I became fast friends. Mostly, she talked, and I listened. We exchanged Christmas cookie recipes, we complained about supervisors, and we had hours of blank space in which to do nothing but stand there and kill time; together, we could murder the hell out of it. A year and a half later, in late July of 2005, when I left for my freshman year of college at the University of Arizona, she gave me a t-shirt she had painted herself. It had four New Orleans scenes: a Mardi Gras mask, coffee and beignets, a St. Charles streetcar, and a couple of Pat O'Brien Hurricanes. Of course, one month later, a different kind of hurricane would come; but, we didn't know that yet.

When Mike Tidwell wrote *Bayou Farewell*, he also had no idea that, two years after the publishing date, the hurricane he predicted could ruin New Orleans actually would. In truth,

though, most of us realized that this possibility existed. We knew if there was a storm, we would all be left in one giant, below-sea-level, sink hole. We vaguely knew this had something to do with coastal erosion and the disappearing barrier islands; that is where all our Christmas trees went year after year, at any rate. But, no one really paid any attention to all of this. Many of us had stopped evacuating years ago anyway. As wetlands' conservationist Kerry St. Pé states, "It's like these people are in a dream state, and no matter how much the rest of us yell and scream, we can't wake them up" (as cited in Tidwell, 2003, p. 139). Much of *Bayou Farewell* is devoted to analyzing this "dream state"—this denial of impending disaster and total lack of empowerment to do anything about it. The "dream state" is kept alive by three factors: lack of tangible evidence, government corruption, and the abundance of the fishing industry.

One can easily analyze each of these three factors by studying Dean Blanchard, who serves as a perfect case study of why Louisiana residents feel empowered to do anything but restore the coastal wetlands. Blanchard is a multi-millionaire, Grand Isle shrimp shed owner, as well as one of the biggest dockside shrimp buyers in the entire state of Louisiana. If anyone would be out there doing something to stop coastal erosion, one would think that it would be Blanchard. Described as "a modern-day Jesse James, a guy who'll break the law when necessary to help the little guy, the shrimper" (Tidwell, 2003, p. 152), Blanchard spent time in the federal penitentiary for buying red snapper from several fishermen when they were out of season, just to help them through some hard times. Also, when Turtle Exclusion Device laws were put in place and shrimpers told him that the bar grid over the trawler nets was causing them to lose shrimp, he organized a mass protest trip to Washington, D.C. Yet, this same man who willingly did jail time for his customers and traveled thousands of miles to the nation's capital to protest an extra bar grid has never once given thought to taking action against wetlands loss. At least, a Turtle

Exclusion Device was something tangible, something he could hold in his hand and whose effects immediately could be seen. But, coastal erosion has been happening for all of Dean Blanchard's life, and he has still made millions off of the shrimping industry.

As Mike Tidwell discovered in his interview with Dean Blanchard, the problem also has to do with lack of faith in government. Blanchard aptly says:

I have a lot of trouble believing de government has de competence to undertake a project as huge as dis so-called ‘savin de coast’ t’ing. I mean, who built all de levees on de Mississippi River to begin wit’ and who authorized all de oil and gas canals across de marsh? De Army Corps of Engineers. Dat’s who. And now dey’re involved in *restoration*? (Tidwell, 2003, p. 159)

On a broad level, Dean Blanchard speaks for most of us in this state, who have grown up with the notion that local government is nothing but corruption and backroom politics. Hayrides are normal. Scandals are expected. Even if we did understand the importance of our coasts, we know that nothing ever would get done. But, now more than ever, the residents of south Louisiana are disgusted with the Corps of Engineers and government incompetence. Just ask anyone who lived a few miles from a levee breach in New Orleans East or Lakeview, and he will tell you what he thinks of the Corps. Better yet, ask someone from Jefferson Parish what he thinks of how Parish President Aaron Broussard forgot to turn on the pumps. If we were jaded about local government before, most of us now are almost completely blinded by anger.

Then, there is the fact that Dean Blanchard is a multi-millionaire because of the shrimping industry, and the shrimp likely will not stop reproducing anytime soon. In truth, the death of the wetlands is fueling the shrimping industry even further, at least for a short period of time. As the grass deteriorates, the coast becomes “a kind of giant compost pile, rich with

available nitrogen, phosphorous, and sulfur, the building blocks of organic life, stoking the food web further” (Tidwell, 2003, p. 265); thus, the shrimp industry is “refueled every twenty-eight minutes by another acre of dying grass” (Tidwell). In other words, dead grass only translates into more food for the shrimp. More shrimp equals more profits, and money is enough to satiate most people, whether or not there is impending catastrophe.

Thus, because of a lack of real, tangible evidence, a lack of faith in government, and a lack of profit differences, Dean Blanchard is apathetic about wetlands loss, even though he has a multi-million dollar stake in the coast. But, Kerry St. Pé warns, “The final calamity is coming. . . . It’s breathing right down our neck and we have very, very little time to do something to keep it from happening” (as cited in Tidwell, 2003, p. 123). Tidwell then further defines “the final calamity” as “the collapse of fishing, the death of endangered birds and habitat, the drowning of human beings by hurricanes” (Tidwell). Tidwell and the wetlands conservationists he interviewed all but predicted Katrina flood levels. Yet, even now, we are still in a state of ignorance and denial. I certainly was until I read this book. I wonder, “How many more hurricanes will it take before the people in this state open their eyes to the reality of it all?” “What will it take to empower people to take control of their lives and save the land they live on?” Personally, I do not care if we do not have a habitat for endangered birds, but I take it to heart that every four miles of marsh absorbs enough flood water to lower flood levels by one foot (Fischetti, 2001).

I never saw or talked to Mimi after I left for Arizona. One month later, on August 29, 2005, Mimi drowned in her own Gentilly home. I still have the t-shirt she painted for me, the recipes we exchanged, and the St. Anthony medal she gave me. My one regret is that I never went to Mimi’s funeral. Sometimes, I dream that I did get to go. Bobby is there, in a short-

sleeved, button-down dress shirt, un-tucked. I am always supposed to be somewhere else, taking an exam—something important—but, I am there anyway. The church is nothing but endless pews and endless maze-like halls. There is no altar. There is no corpse—only a portrait set up on an easel, next to an empty casket.

References

- Fischetti, M. (2001). The drowning of New Orleans. *Scientific American*, 285(4), 76-85.
- Tidwell , M. (2003). *Bayou farewell: The rich life and tragic death of Louisiana's cajun coast*. New York: Vintage Books.