

THE
OMG
CHRONICLES

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One Man's Quest to Discover
What God Means to People
All Over the World

Peter Rodger



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This book is dedicated to my father, George Rodger, who taught me how to wield a camera; to my mother, Jinx Rodger, for being a pillar of strength; to my father-in-law, Abdesalam Akaaboune, who taught me how to go with the flow; and to Soumaya, my wife; and Elliot, Georgia, and Jazz, my children, for putting up with my absence, even when I was at home.

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	ix
<i>Introduction: What Is God?</i>	xi

PART I: INTO THE UNKNOWN

Chapter 1: The Leap	3
Chapter 2: Louisiana	11
Chapter 3: Road Trip	17
Chapter 4: India	31
Chapter 5: Exploring Raipur	45
Chapter 6: Adventures Around Chhattisgarh.....	53
Chapter 7: Delhi and the Punjab.....	65
Chapter 8: Vrindaban.....	77
Chapter 9: North to “Little Tibet”	91
Chapter 10: Africa	107
Chapter 11: White Mischief.....	119
Chapter 12: The Holy Land.....	131
Chapter 13: Morocco.....	149

PART II: HUMANITY AND INHUMANITY

Chapter 14: A Time of Contrasts.....	167
Chapter 15: Rome and Vatican City	179
Chapter 16: A Brief Trip Home.....	191
Chapter 17: London	205

Chapter 18: Seal and Ringo Starr	215
Chapter 19: Down Under	223
Chapter 20: Hugh Jackman and Baz Luhrmann	233
Chapter 21: The Island of the Gods.....	241
Chapter 22: Japan.....	251

PART III: CATCHING BUTTERFLIES

Chapter 23: “My God Is Greater Than Your God”	261
Chapter 24: HRH Princess Michael of Kent	281
Chapter 25: Sir Bob Geldof.....	287
Chapter 26: Kashmir	295
Chapter 27: Dr. John F. Demartini	303
Chapter 28: Eagles	311
Chapter 29: David Copperfield	315
Chapter 30: Mexico City	321
Chapter 31: On a Plane	333
Chapter 32: Orange County, California	339
Chapter 33: Onwards	345
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	349
<i>About the Author</i>	353

PREFACE



There's a hushed silence. Many people are sitting expectantly in a room in a foreign land. It's hot outside. They are all different—different people with different sensibilities—yet they all have made the effort to be here. They are waiting for me. It's so quiet, I can hear their breathing.

The presenter has uttered my name. This is my moment. I bound down the steps to the podium. I have to say words, to strangers, to shadows, to people . . . to the audience I have thought about for three years. Now they are here, waiting patiently for me to say something.

I take the microphone and look out. All I can see are anonymous shapes. Yet I know that each shape cloaks an identity—a discerning thinker; an individual; a mother, brother, sister, wife, husband, lover, friend; an intellect; an enjoyer of food. I take a breath and start speaking: “I cannot think of a more appropriate place to launch a film entitled *Oh My God* than here in the Holy Land.”

I am in Jerusalem, and I am launching my film amid the hubbub of it all: the claims, the disdain, the walls, the hurt, the pain, the history, the thorns, the corruption, the disruption, the diggers, the seekers, the policemen, the peacemakers . . . the Holy Land.

I have spent three years—and all my money, time, and energy—traveling across 23 countries asking: “What is God?” And now here I am, presenting my movie for the first time at the Jerusalem International Film Festival in the Holy Land. But is it really the Holy Land . . . or the Land of Holes?



INTRODUCTION



What Is God?

I was on a ski lift at the Deer Valley Resort in Utah when the idea came to me. I was watching incredible vistas of bright white slopes slowly and silently unfold below on a perfect winter's day. The sun was so bright, bouncing off the wedding-cake folds of fresh snow, that it flared my goggles. The overpowering beauty of the earth beneath me inspired me to mutter to my friend, "God—this is like—God-kissed."

"Hmm," she agreed without thinking.

I pondered my statement for a while. It had seemed so natural, so easy, and instantly understandable as it had tripped effortlessly off my tongue. But what exactly did it *mean*?

We had been attending the Sundance Film Festival. I had been working for years to get an independent film off the ground, and I had just heard that my financing had fallen through.

"You know what I should do," I announced, rather than asked. "I should make a film asking people around the world, 'What is God?' That would be really cool."

My fate was sealed.

I HAVE AN EXTREMELY ACTIVE MIND that gets bored very easily. I have always tried to fight this, but I realize it's a battle I'm never going to win. So I've developed a strategy to keep myself from becoming insane with boredom when I'm in positions of imprisonment—for instance, going out with people with whom I don't want to be. My strategy is . . . *napkins*. Since paper napkins are always available, whenever I feel a fit of boredom coming on, I grab a few, pilfer a pen from a bartender, and entertain myself by inventing little

adages. Consequently, I literally have stacks of napkins from all over the world, filled with meaningful phrases (well, meaningful to *me*, that is)—many of which can be found at the beginning of the following chapters.

But there's one adage for which I wish I could take credit. A bizarre psychic enlightened me to it in London years ago. Crippled, he would hobble into a darkened room on a weird contraption, then proceed to wag his head about and glaze his eyes until he entered a trancelike state, at which time he would start to "become" a spirit called Ishmael. I'm not sure whether it was Ishmael talking or the psychic—but this is what he said: "Yesterday's breath is memory, tomorrow's breath is contemplation, but the air in your lungs now is what is keeping you alive."

I like that statement. It has a certain ring to it, and it became a source of strength for me throughout the entire project.

Ever since I completed my adventure, many people have asked me why I dropped a successful career as a director of commercials and advertising photographer to pick up a camera and travel for so long asking people, "What is God?"

My semi-ersatz reply is that I was fed up with the childish school-yard mentality that permeates our world—I call it the "My God is greater than your God" syndrome—where we have grown men slamming airplanes into buildings, shouting, "God is great!" Where we have the Reverend Pat Robertson saying that the nation of Haiti was devastated by a large earthquake because its people "made a pact" with "the devil." Where we have the constitution of a country (Iran) dictating that its supreme leader is "God's representative on Earth." And where we have people blowing themselves up and murdering innocents because they believe it will buy them a place in heaven.

But before I start sharing this adventure with you, let me tell you a little about me. I'm a curly-headed Brit who moved to Los Angeles with my family in 1996. And, dare I admit it, I am now middle-aged, although I still feel like a teenager. I am deeply addicted to traveling, experiencing new adventures, and discovering new places. I was heavily influenced by my late father, George Rodger, who was a photojournalist and taught me how

to see in a photographic, visual-storytelling way—a privileged education that I then nurtured into a career. I love food and have always been fascinated by people. I’m an Aries, and have a tendency to jump into things based on gut instinct, which has caused me trouble on more than one occasion.

I grew up in an Anglican household and went to church every week. I attended Sunday school and was baptized and confirmed. I was brought up to believe that God was this kind, fatherlike spirit in the sky in the image of man; and if you wanted to go to heaven (which was a really nice place) when you died, then you had to behave yourself on Earth and abide by His rules.

It never occurred to me to question this upbringing until I started traveling extensively and was introduced to other cultures. Then, when 9/11 happened, I realized that a lot of what goes on in the name of God seems to be diametrically opposed not only to what I had been taught, but also to what the prophets of all the main religions preached. It wasn’t until I started to study the world on a more spiritual level that I began to realize that so many of us were as conditioned as I had been. Suddenly, the whole concept of God just didn’t seem to make any sense to me anymore.

What kind of a world would my children grow up in? In an age of oversaturated information . . . awareness, understanding, tolerance, and ultimately peace were being threatened by religious dogma, barbaric actions, and polarized opinions. Knowledge seemed to be flowing at an unprecedented rate. Wisdom seemed to be ebbing at an unprecedented rate. It seemed that truth was becoming diluted by too many voices all keen to reference the name of God to further their own agendas.

But what exactly *is* God? Does anyone really know?

It was this yearning that must have bubbled to the surface that sunny morning in Utah, and as the weeks passed, the desire to find out what other individuals around the world thought about this contentious issue took root and began to grow. There are so many conflicting ideas about God, as well as so much sensitivity. I wanted to know why everyone gets so riled up about this entity that means different things to different people. Perhaps if I posed the same set of questions to a diverse group of men, women, and

children, some light could be shed upon this ancient conundrum.

So in 2006, without any financial backers, I took a line of credit out on my house (which in those days was actually increasing in value) and went out into the world to ask these questions. I did an intense amount of reading and research. I knew I couldn't make a film about what people thought God was without embracing the major religions and visiting the Middle East. I wanted my journey to unfold organically, with one thing leading naturally to another. I asked all my friends and family for suggestions and introductions, and most of the people you will meet in this book came as contacts from that process. Since there was no way I could accomplish the whole journey in one trip, I let circumstance take its course and did it in chunks—so I could at least come home from time to time and make sure my family wouldn't forget who I was.

I had no idea when I started just how long the process would take, or that it would culminate in my penning the work you now hold in your hands. *The OMG Chronicles* started on day one with a journal that became the germ for these written words, but it was the excitement and the hilarity of circumstance that made writing this book as important, if not more important, than the film itself. There was so much said by so many wonderful people that couldn't be expressed in a 98-minute documentary, so the book quickly became an opportunity to delve deeper and experience the layers of the world in which we live, as well as feel the hearts of those with whom we share our lives.

But most of all, it is the behind-the-scenes adventures—and misadventures—that make *The OMG Chronicles* such a wonderful extension to *Oh My God*. So much happened during the making of the film that obviously had no part in the movie itself, but which added much color to the backstory—from how I got to each place; to the people with whom I traveled; to the sometimes poignant, occasionally unbelievable, and oftentimes downright hilarious characters and experiences I encountered along the way. Some made me laugh, some made me cry, but all of them, in their own ways, contributed something unforgettable to this journey.

But back when my journey started, I had no idea of any of this. All I knew was that there were two things driving me: one

was a question that no one, to my knowledge, had ever answered satisfactorily; the other, I'll confess, was a desperate need for adventure and escape. I yearned to shoot the world through my own lens, as opposed to the one commissioned by a client. And perhaps, too, I was a little unhealthily motivated to do something to serve, and cultivate, my own ego. That was the air that was in my lungs—those were the desires that were keeping me alive—and it gives me great pleasure to share this journey, warts and all, in the following pages.

When I started out, I thought it would be fun to have a six-month adventure. . . .

Nothing could prepare me for what I found.



PART I

INTO THE UNKNOWN



CHAPTER 1

The Leap



"Yesterday was hard, but the good news is, it's no longer here."

— NAPKIN #1

God, couldn't you have made me go on a different day?

There was no turning back, it seemed, as I made my way to Los Angeles International Airport to board a flight to London and then on to Tangier, Morocco. I was finally off on my adventure. I had forsaken my career, mortgaged my house, and leased a whole load of camera equipment, planning to travel around the world to ask all sorts of different people, "What is God?" Was I absolutely barking mad?

It was mainly frustration that had driven me to make this "leap." Why on earth would people blow themselves up, slamming airplanes into buildings, shouting, "God is great!"? What did suicide and murder have to do with an entity that all the prophets and belief systems around the world seemed to indicate was a father figure of compassion? Why did people use God's name to induce fear, and unhealthily enhance their own nefarious political agendas? Why does any human being have the right to tell others that they're going to go to hell after they die because they aren't members of the right club? *"My God is greater than your God. Worship my God and you will be saved when you die!"* Where were all those people who acted with benevolence, charity, and *compassion* in God's name?

I really wanted to find out what people had to say. Would they agree? Would they disagree? Would they disagree to agree? Perhaps they would agree to disagree. By asking diverse individuals from as many places as possible across the globe, perhaps I could shed some light on this age-old question.

There was no doubt it was a daunting exercise I had set for myself. The world seemed so large, with multiple permutations and combinations of ideas, differences of opinions, and belief systems—and the first problem was, where was I going to start?

My wife, Soumaya, was from Tangier, so it seemed sensible to wet my toes in territory that was not only accessible through her family and their connections, but also exotic. Soumaya's father, Abdesalam, had put together a great itinerary for me and was going to get all sorts of interesting characters together to appear in front of my lens. All I needed to do was pack the cameras, get on a plane, and go.

But the date I chose to travel, August 10, 2006, was the day after the British police had busted a group of terrorists attempting to take liquid explosives onto planes bound for the United States with the intent of blowing them up in the name of my protagonist. The skyways were in turmoil. It was the first time in aviation history that you couldn't take any hand luggage on board. You could only carry a see-through Ziploc bag with ticket, money, and credit cards inside. No books, no pens, no cell phones, no computers, no water, no duty-free items, no jewelry (and no ego). I had just one Claritin pill with me (because planes make me sneeze all the time) in one of those individual foil blister packs that are impossible to open. They found it. They made me swallow it in front of them before they let me board the plane.

I'd been filming around the world for years, and there was a golden rule: always take your film stock (or these days, tape stock and hard drives), lenses, and camera with you on board in case the baggage goes missing. This usually requires copious amounts of charm, time, and teeth clenching with polyester-clad airline staff. In 20 years of traveling, it had never failed—until today, when they refused to allow carry-on luggage aboard and then made me swallow my antihistamine.

So when I arrived in North Africa, everything—from the leased camera equipment, tapes, lenses, chargers, laptop, cell phone, and my research material with all my handwritten notes and quotes; to the little gifts I had brought for my family and friends; to my socks, shirts, shoes, and my soul . . . every last item that had been

in the hold of the British Airways aircraft—had vanished, never to be seen again. As I stood by the carousel, poised for the grab, waiting for my baggage and equipment to slide through the hole and inch toward me on that squeaky black tacky rubber belt, it slowly dawned upon me that my documentary film was already over before it had even started.

My mind revisited that favorite adage I heard from that psychic in London years ago: “Yesterday’s breath is memory, tomorrow’s breath is contemplation, but the air in your lungs now is what is keeping you alive . . .” *Not without a camera!* I thought, hyperventilating. Had I upset Him so badly that my equipment had been taken from me? The irony was not lost on me. I was a victim of those would-be terrorists spouting His name. Perhaps this film wasn’t such a good idea, after all. What was I doing? What had I done? What was I *going* to do? I didn’t even have a toothbrush.

WITH SHATTERED DREAMS AND EXPLODED EXPECTATIONS, I had to endure the torture of being in a colorful foreign country with endless filming opportunities that couldn’t be captured, because everything I needed to make the film was gone. Instead, I found myself bartering for boxer shorts in the bazaar. I couldn’t even fly home early, as the aviation world was reeling from the latest security upheaval.

Even when I finally arrived back in the U.S. dressed like someone out of *Hideous Kinky*, it took almost two months of intense work to get compensated, purchase new equipment, and program it. I endured a streak of bad luck where just about everything went wrong: my mother, who lives in England, broke her arm when she was hit by a car as she was walking home from the post office; my friend’s brother collapsed in Chechnya and died (poisoning was eventually ruled out); and I was booked for speeding and got a parking ticket in the same day. I soon wondered if someone was trying to tell me something.

But no. I decided that all these events were telling me that I simply *had to make this film*. The world had gone crazy! There seemed to be no direction anywhere, for anyone, anymore. No one’s decisions were making any sense. Wars were being fought based

on lies. People had been stripped of faith because there no longer seemed to be any boundaries between politics and religion, or even church and state. Major beliefs had been shattered by science, yet the believers had become more fanatical. People everywhere were suddenly angry, about *everything*. Knowledge was becoming dangerous. Lack of knowledge was becoming explosive. Stories and parables were being undermined; the spin had no web, no sense, no direction, and no course. People were holding on to their past and their social and formal educations, clutching on to their religions and beliefs and passing the buck onto answers they had been conditioned to regurgitate, without questioning who, where, what, or why. People were now drifting at the whim of previously unimagined forces, like the Internet and overcontrolled media. The liberation of freethinking had suddenly released the controls on our lives. God had become questionable. Religion was becoming fanatical, fundamental, or nonexistent. Were the ones who were really manipulating the world beginning to lose their grip because of undeniable questioning, or were they just beginning to take control? Who really knew? And who were “they” anyway?

I decided that the events I had just experienced had nothing to do with God, nothing to do with anything . . . but they had a lot to do with me: they had strengthened my resolve to make this film, and my faith in the project was rekindled. In retrospect, I realize that when I did finally manage to start filming, I hit a wave of fortuitous timing that never would have occurred had I not been derailed.

Perhaps there’s a reason for everything.

AFTER A FEW WEEKS OF HELL, I found myself on Monday, October 2, 2006, surrounded by cases of brand-new camera equipment . . . and waves of anxiety. Today was the day I was going to start—again—on the documentary. Not wishing to repeat myself (or history), I had decided to begin the shoot with a road trip from Los Angeles to New Orleans and back. I wasn’t going alone, though. I had persuaded my friend Patrick Ellis to accompany me as my producer and overall support mechanism.

Patrick is a character. Supremely intelligent, fluent in many languages, and a relentless smoker, he's a cross between Patrick O'Brian's Dr. Stephen Maturin from *Master and Commander* and Keith Richards. I often wonder if he just likes to challenge statistics, or if he's trying to prove something by conducting his life excessively as a rebuke to convention. A chameleon who spends his life on the road, working internationally as a producer, he was the perfect partner for this adventure. I didn't have to explain stuff to Patrick, and Patrick could explain stuff to *me*. His main job was to organize where we were going and whom we were to interview. He spent lengthy periods of time glued to the phone setting up interesting people and places for us to film.

My other companion, Alexander van Bubenheim, was the antithesis of Patrick. A large Bavarian who is a black belt in karate, with a fondness for knives, guns, skydiving, wine, and women, he constantly gets himself into trouble by uttering politically incorrect statements at the most inappropriate moments. An Aries through and through (just like me), he's compulsive, tough, tortured, and above all, a talented composer (although by looking at him, you would have guessed a completely different career). Because of his military, don't-mess-with-me aura and many a verbal faux pas, Alex soon earned the nickname *Colonel Boobs*.

The waves of anxiety that accompanied me throughout the trip stemmed from the reality that I had absolutely no idea what I was trying to do. The only thing I knew was that I was doing it—whatever *it* was. I drew comfort from the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, in which Indy has to cross a nasty ravine by taking a leap of faith. We learn (in the movie) that if one *believes* one can cross, one can cross, but Indy stares perplexed at the ravine, which appears to be both unrealistically deep and impossibly wide. But he isn't fooled; it's an optical illusion, for there's a bridge, but it has been camouflaged, painted to look just like the rock strata of the ravine wall behind. Clever Indy throws sand on it to reveal its presence, and then strides confidently and safely across to the other side.

I felt rather like this myself that day and was desperately trying to change my perspective so that I could reveal my own bridge to safety, yet all I could see was an extremely wide gap. Why was I doing this? But here I was, with everything packed and ready to go; it was too late to turn back now. I felt like Frodo Baggins in the Shire without a Gandalf. Then I realized that stepping out into the unknown was what it was all about. How cool was that? Let the current take you . . . and if you believe it's taking you where you want to go, sit back and make sure you do what you need to do; record the journey professionally, visually, artistically, and succinctly so you can share it with the world.

It had been time to go for hours, but we had already missed our self-imposed deadline of departure. We stuffed the equipment into my SUV and said good-bye to my wife, Soumaya, and my children, Elliot, Georgia, and Jazz; and off we headed toward New Orleans and a long, long journey into the unknown.

By the time we finally hit the I-10 freeway heading east, it felt good—very good.

There was another character (of sorts) among our crew: “Agnes the navigation system.” She had such a polite, kind, patient voice and was never rude, even after a wrong turn. She was a constant oracle of direction. She would talk to us from time to time, even when she didn’t really need to, just to reassure us that we hadn’t gone wrong. She never raised her voice. She was our female HAL.

We took turns at the wheel all day and into the night. The idea was to drive nonstop until we arrived in New Orleans; spend a few days shooting there; then meander slowly cross-country through Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and back to California. Our route would be guided by what we learned.

It was documentary-filmmaking time. The problem was, Patrick, in a Keith Richards moment, decided to swallow the whole contents of one of those multicolored truck-stop caffeine-pill packages. They kept him awake for a good while, but then he started to feel a little poorly, and his eyesight went squiffy. Instead of keeping him alert and on top of things, he went into

a caffeine-induced, spasmodic-twitching mode. Alone in the backseat, riddled with angst and unwilling to disturb me, he courageously kept his plight to himself.

Baffled by the incessant scratching and writhing going on back there, I would occasionally inquire if he was all right, but before I had even finished asking, he would cut me off at the pass with a tightly clipped “Yep, fine.” In fact, every time I started to formulate a word, he would quickly butt in with a “Yep, fine.”

Colonel Boobs had made it very clear that, owing to his eyesight, he was a daytime driver only. So I ended up taking the wheel most of the night, until the beautiful rays of the desert sun started to peek over the horizon and it was light enough for the Colonel to see. It was a very long night for me. My mind wandered everywhere, from pondering the true color of the paint marks on the road to what the work crew had been thinking as they operated the machinery laying them down on a highway 3,000 miles long. I wondered what their opinion was about God.

In the middle of the afternoon of the second day, we pulled off the freeway for gas and found ourselves in a different world—on the back roads of Texas. The gas station was also the general store of a hick town called Roosevelt, population 19. Finally I was about to start filming the first frames of the documentary. Giddy with excitement and feeling like a cowboy putting my gun together, I assembled the camera, hitched up my pants, and moseyed on in. I interviewed most of the locals; and to my dismay, I realized I had bitten off so much that I could barely move my jaw, let alone chew.

I hadn’t realized how hard it was to formulate questions in my head and then ask them succinctly in a way that the interviewee could understand, while at the same time controlling the light and exposure levels on a complex camera that I’d never used before because it had only just been invented. And that was without the added handicap of having driven nonstop for two days and a night. I felt like a nervous young virgin—extremely keen to do the deed, but scared into impotence.

And everyone said the same thing: “I believe in God.”

“Why do you believe in God?”

"I always have since I was a kid."

"But what *is* God?"

"God is everything. God's in here," they'd avow, tapping their hearts.

"How do you know?"

"Because I feel it—because I believe it. I live my life for Him."

"But have you ever met Him?"

"Not yet—I hope not—I'm not dead yet! I don't think!" They'd chuckle.

"So you think you will meet Him when you die?"

"I hope so. I lead my life with the values I believe will send me to heaven when I pass on. I hope to meet Him then."

Wow, I thought. *Here's conviction, faith, a code of life—everyone's saying the same thing.* They were all very generous people, but were any of them really thinking for themselves? Or had they just been conditioned by their upbringing to say this? Were their beliefs and expressions of faith really coming from their hearts, or had it been implanted—and if it *had* been implanted, by whom?

We left the gas station with invitations to come elk hunting in November when the season started. We would always be welcome in Roosevelt.

WE DIDN'T GET TO NEW ORLEANS IN ONE HIT. None of us had understood the vastness of the United States of America. Figures, particularly zeros, don't adequately illustrate the reality. You have to drive across the U.S. to truly understand that the country is *absolutely massive*; it goes on for miles and miles—especially the Lone Star State. We copped out at 8:30 P.M. in Seguin, Texas; ate some extremely unhealthy food; and hit the hay in a cheap motel.



CHAPTER 2

Louisiana



“Falling is fine—it is the landing that causes the pain.”

— NAPKIN #2

We arrived in New Orleans at dusk and checked into Le Richelieu Hotel. New Orleans had been falling for years (as far as crime, poverty, and the shameful ostracism of its minority citizens were concerned), but it was very evident as we drove into town that it had landed with a very hard bump. Or rather, the wrath of Katrina had visited its shores with frightening impact, exposing all the social weaknesses and stigmas concealed beneath the glittering facades of Mardi Gras, Jazz Fest, and Bourbon Street.

It had been just over a year since the disaster, and the city I had once known so well, having filmed here many times, was no longer the same. The sense of dispossession and emptiness was palpable; people trudged the streets as if through treacle, that *look* of aftershock still tattooed onto their brows. The “It is what it is” resignation uttered by so many lips was evident in their movements and actions. The core and heart of the Big Easy had been sucked dry; its very soul flattened. The Big Easy had turned into the *Big Difficult*.

Even the music in the French Quarter seemed to have lost its rhythm and soul. Its presence felt like an echo of performances past, as if it was only there for the few tourists and not being played by musicians for musicians in a musicians’ town. New Orleans was a sad place now, a poor facsimile of its former self; but at least the food was still good, and the locals put on a brave face and welcomed us in true Southern style.

Katrina became a character in my film. She had swept through; made a lot of noise; and left a huge trail of devastation, desperation,

disappointment, and anger in her wake. Although physically long gone, she was mentally immortal. I wanted to know how she'd affected the survivors' thoughts about God.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING WE SET OUT to shoot the storm damage. It was a wake-up call. We drove past block after block that on the surface looked normal. It was only when we got closer that we realized the houses were all derelict on the inside, abandoned and empty. The lights had gone out on this part of the city, and there was no one at home.

It soon became obvious that large chunks of the area had withered and died, and become ghost towns. There were malls full of stores with no windows, their contents still spilling out into the parking lots like the scattered entrails of a disemboweled horse.

We entered the Lower Ninth Ward. This was the place we'd heard so much about—the point where the levee had broken and flooded all those poor people's homes. Houses that had been picked up and plunked down on top of cars were still there today. The only things left lurking in the soil were anger, horror, and a whole load of unanswered questions. You could feel the despair, the anguish, and see the once-prized items of clothing hanging in ripped-open wardrobes, waiting for owners who would never return.

I wedged the camera on the running board of the SUV, and Patrick drove slowly down the deserted streets as I shot the graphic shapes of neglected retail. Colonel Boobs donned his special digital microphone and captured the echo of emptiness in department stores still stocked with goods that the looters hadn't felt worthy of looting.

Later that afternoon, as the sun was painting graceful rays upon inelegant destruction, we came across a charismatic African-American man, named Nathaniel, clearing the last of the debris from the yard of his friend's house. He ranted and raved as he chopped dead branches with a blunt machete. He wasn't angry, though. He praised the Lord! He revered God.

The storm damage wasn't caused by God, he said. It was caused by the breaking of a levee that was built by man. God sent

the storm as a lesson to force the evil folk to pull up their socks; expose their indulgent, weak ways; and make them atone for how they'd chosen to conduct their lives.

No, Nathaniel wasn't angry with God; Nathaniel *thanked* God.

"You're born with nothin'—naked and free. When you die, you can't take any material things with you, like this house or my 1972 Cadillac. You can only take what's in here . . ." He tapped his heart. "And I'm thankful to God for sending us this lesson. He could have made it a lot worse. He could have made the waters 60 feet deep instead of 20, but He didn't. I admire what He's done!"

I rather admired Nathaniel's strength of character. His resolve was based on his faith. That was sufficient for him, and God seemed to be working for him.

Nathaniel continued: "I'm a firm believer that you're not gone until ya time. If it was time for me, I wouldn't be here right now talking wit' you." He pulled himself up to his full height, and his eyes stared intensely. "You have to live a good and righteous life. But it's not gonna be stress free. Livin' is stressful. It's according to how you adjust to it and deal with the situation. This is stress, here," he said, gazing at the devastation surrounding us. "Looking at the city is stress, but we're not gonna be stressed for the rest of our lives. We have to face reality to deal with what happened, pick up the pieces, and move on with our lives. That's what we need to do, and that's what I'm prepared to do. Thank you."

By the time we finished, a harvest moon hung over the Ninth Ward like a silver-gold pendant—a beacon of light that never changes, illuminating a very changed world below.

We returned to the relative opulence of the French Quarter and ate somewhere jolly, loud, and cheap—to expel the gloomy spirits of all that we had just witnessed. Everyone gets down from time to time, but in the face of what I was witnessing, it made me feel ashamed for not appreciating how privileged I was.

THE NEXT DAY, PATRICK HAD ORGANIZED an appointment with a popular minister called Doctor Clay, who lived out in the suburb of Kenner, Louisiana. Doctor Clay was supremely devout, oozed genuine benevolence, but was not quite as colorful as our friend

Nathaniel with the blunt machete. But amid the monotony of his dialogue we occasionally came across little pearls of wisdom.

I asked Doctor Clay about God and time.

“God is not in time’s hand; time is in God’s hand,” he said. “Before there was a beginning, there was God; and there’s not a suggestion that God Himself had a beginning process because He’s not a product of the beginning process, but rather, before the beginning began to be, He already was.”

That night we found a fantastic bar with a great band, where I zoned out to the most exquisite blues guitar mixed with soul. Here the musicians played music for musicians. It made me wonder: *Perhaps God is music, or music is God?* It’s certainly a language that everyone can understand.

Our next port of call was the Upper Ninth Ward, where the majority of the homes also had been rendered uninhabitable by the floodwaters. Much of the area was deserted, as there was very little in the way of accommodations. Those who were left lived in little white FEMA trailers, parked in the backyards of houses with uncertain futures. Many homes had been burned down as a result of feuds fueled by anger, jealousies, and despair. Every front door sported a spray-painted red cross, creating four segments in which the date of city inspection, the name of the district, the initials of the inspector, and the number of dead bodies (either human or animal) that had been discovered on the property had been scribbled. It reminded me of the stories of the days of the great plague in Europe. It was a chilling sight.

Whenever we came across human beings, I would ask to talk with them, but they all turned me down. They’d had enough of news crews. They were fed up with white people sticking cameras in their faces. They were still in shock a year later, their eyes glazed over with a permanent film of anger and hurt. They had no money, no jobs, no possessions, broken promises, and innumerable letdowns; they were victims of corruption, and there was no sign of a better future.

We came across a group of kids, the Offray brothers. They were full of life and full of pain. They all looked way older than they were. The youngest, about eight, stood on the porch of his

dilapidated house. I asked him, “Whereabouts do you think God was when the big storm hit?”

He replied, “He evacuated to another city in the sky.”

“So while Katrina was here, God wasn’t here?”

“No,” he answered definitively. Then he added, “I wanna give a shout-out to ma mama. I wanna give a shout-out to ma dadda. I wanna give a shout-out to ma sister and”—he hit his chest—“God, right here in my heart.” He kissed his fingers and held them to the heavens. “Rest in peace to ma uncle, ma cousin Danny—he dead. Just wanna give a shout-out to ma whole family.” He kissed his fingers again. A car alarm went off in the distance. He crossed himself. “I love You, God. I’m in the Sixth Ward right now. Come and see me. Peace.” And then he turned away.

THERE IS SOMETHING UNIQUE TO LOUISIANA. A melancholy accentuated by the wailing cries of distant trains, a humidity that declares its presence on good folks’ walls, that peels paint and sits heavy in your lungs as you fight off the heat. There is a sexy romance about the South—immortalized by Anne Rice and dramatized with the blood pouring over Lisa Bonet in *Angel Heart*. You can cut the vibe of the South with a knife. If you sit still in the swamps and listen to the critters, nature is the embodiment of the light and the dark, the primal ooze, complete with cottonmouths, water moccasins, and alligators. No wonder the blues bubbled up from these murky depths—man’s expression of bringing light out of the dark, spirit out of despair, heady notes to ease the hearts and souls of generations of the displaced and abused. The blues was alive—very much alive.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Peter Rodger grew up looking through a camera lens. As a teenager, the award-winning British director and photographer honed his skills by assisting his father, George Rodger, the renowned photojournalist and co-founder of Magnum Photos.

Peter's skill with the lens has made him one of the most sought-after advertising talents in both Europe and the U.S. He's filmed and photographed numerous car, clothing, and cosmetics companies' commercial and print campaigns in more than 40 countries.

Following an epic three-year journey producing, directing, and filming across 23 countries, Peter's nonfiction film *Oh My God* (and the inspiration for this book) is now available on DVD (Hay House).

In addition to winning numerous awards for his filmed work, and exhibiting his fine art all over the world, Peter has penned seven screenplays: *Bystander*, *Here Again*, *Mrs. Carr*, *Swapped*, *Publication Day*, *The Ban*, and *Comfort Of The Storm*, which he is directing and is currently in preproduction.

Peter resides in Los Angeles with his wife and children.

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