

# Rack of Enchantment

## The Not-So-Secret of Mardi Gras

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It's 7 a.m. on Fat Tuesday, the final and peak day of New Orleans carnival. I'm up, or waking up, drinking my first bloody mary of the day, hot glue gun in hand sticking dozens of oversized fake chrysanthemums to my cape in the last calm minutes before the madness resumes.

I've had a few hours sleep since last night's event, the coronation ball of the brilliant Krewe du Poux (yeah, that's "poo"), where my group appeared wearing tall conical hats made to look like piles of shit with flies buzzing around them. We scavenged the hats from the trash of a major parade, then repainted and adorned them for our purposes at the last minute. The Poux party was a real circus, featuring a midway of homemade carnival games and a raucous shopping cart smash-up derby followed by a parade through the neighborhood. I barely made it there because I'd been in bed all day recovering from my own krewe's parade and the afterparty where I alternated bartending and dancing until 4 a.m.

This has been going on for over two weeks and non-stop for the past five days. Now the warm-up is over. We've added our theme parties and small maverick parades to the buildup of momentum towards this day, when Mardi Gras finally overwhelms all attempts at organization, cohesion, and sense with its chaotic whirlwind that picks us up, knocks us around, blows us away, and finally lays us down hopefully unharmed, spent, sated, satisfied. Today, you just put on your best costume, shove a few dollars into your shoe, and hope for the best.

Knowing this, I move slowly, finishing my costume in that state of tingly energized calm that must be akin to how a boxer feels before entering the ring.

Carnival is not a vacation. It's not even relaxing, though it has its quiet moments. No, for a lot of us, carnival season is the most intense and grueling period of concentrated effort in the whole long year. It's a break, sure—a break in the routine of everyday life—and into this opening rush strange and delirious winds. A mysterious fever or an inexplicable unearned hangover might knock you down for a day or two, or you're running on no sleep because you laid awake all night worrying about your costume. You can't remember your last healthy meal. It's all part of the delirium. You're frazzled, raw, moved by grand forces. Emotions run high. Old joys and pains resurface. You might cry at the sight of something beautiful and not know why, or you're sobbing and dancing and laughing all at once, the expression of a single nameless feeling.

Sometimes it's too much. You want to quit, go home and sit this one out. Take it easy—there's always next year. And maybe you do. Or maybe you want to keep going, ride the wave until it breaks. But that takes commitment. That takes work. You don't leap effortlessly into total intoxicated transcendence, at noon, in painted face and costumed dancing in the street in the arms of friends and strangers.

Carnival is not a spectator sport, though there are events for tourists and spectators. In the official parades, thrown by the exclusive monied krewes, lawyers and businessmen in creepy masks toss plastic trinkets and beads to the outstretched arms of the crowds packed against the barricades. This is the aspect of carnival covered in the newspapers, where the ruling elites are glorified, and the success of the season is measured by the number of tons

of garbage hauled off of the streets each day. And of course, there is the spectacle of Bourbon Street, where drunk tourists and college students amass beneath balconies screaming for a chance to see some boobs.

But these are not the arenas where carnival achieves its potential. Even what I call “the real carnival,” the inspired lunacy in the streets that happens away from the big parades, away from Bourbon Street, may not appeal to you when you see it from the outside, with a detached eye. Plenty of people well-accustomed to partying and revelry think that carnival is stupid, entropic, trashy, tacky, scary, repulsive, gross. And it just might be all these things, but it’s something else too. And you only find that something else by throwing yourself in. And the more you throw in, the more you find.

But it’s not for everybody. Mardi Gras is not for people who don’t appreciate chaos, excess, intoxication, crowds, danger, unpredictability. But for those who do, for those who can enter into the collective altered consciousness that carnival offers, the experience can reach the level of a quasi-shamanic vision quest where the spirits come alive and the fabric of reality is transformed.

As fantastic as that statement may sound, it gets to the heart of what carnival is all about. Carnival is a celebration by and of the people, a chance to cut loose and get wild before the start of Catholic Lent, the forty days of fasting that prepares you for Easter. Before submitting to a period of strict and sober religious discipline, the people take over the streets to enjoy the other side of the coin. To show that another life is possible and closer to their hearts: an ecstatic and lewd costumed debauchery where order and rules do not apply, where class divisions are forgotten, in which one lives for the moment and there is no such thing as guilt or repentance. The saturnalia. The world turned upside down.

You obviously don’t have to be a practicing Catholic—I’m not—for carnival to function in just this way. Whether or not we have the specter of Lent, the Pope, and the Crucified One to drive the point home, we all live with the split between society’s solar time and lunar, festal time. Society’s time is a careful human construction—ordered, rational, predictable, repetitive. It organizes work, industry, commerce, the schedules of TV programs, the war machine. Then there is dark time, which is fluid, unpredictable, contains whirlpools and deep stillnesses, turns back on itself, resists being counted. What is learned in this space cannot be learned in the light of the working day. Lunar time is crucial but is increasingly pushed to the margins of our daily lives, if it exists at all. Those who know its charms might throw themselves into art, sex, or get stoned and drunk any chance they can to drink a few gulps from its nourishing springs. Still, this side of life remains neglected, malnourished, and we are malnourished because of it.

Like all Catholic holidays (“holy-days”), carnival has its roots in pagan times, when the need for a balance between solar and lunar time was recognized. I’ve heard that even in the middle ages a full third of the calendar year was devoted to holidays, celebrations, and festivals, when the workaday cycle of labor and agricultural peasant toil was broken by rejuvenating bouts of festal excess. Nowadays, if we’re lucky, we have carnival, our once-a-year chance to get together, give it our all, and see how far we can go into that “other world”, that sacred space that erupts through the fabric of the everyday life of a city.

So what’s it really like? Everyone has their own journey. Some folks are content to have the day off work, invite the family over for a cookout or a shrimp boil. Or maybe you meet the mysterious Green Man at a neighborhood bar far away from the main action. Or in the pre-dawn you watch the Skull & Bones Gang emerge as skeletons to perform their ceremony of “the dead waking the living,” gathering souls from the cemeteries and parading through the streets of their African-American neighborhood to reunite them with the waking world.

Or maybe it goes like this:

I finish my costume and head out to a small bar on the outskirts of the French Quarter where friends are meeting up to have their faces painted. Everyone’s assembled on the sidewalk, looking amazing in their costumes, already laughing and dancing around joyously. There’s a mobile sound system, too: an apple cart topped with a gorgeous papier-mache woman, arms upraised, blaring the weirdest dance music from her hairy armpits. Before long, a handful of restless bodies decide to break away to the French Quarter looking for adventure.

It helps to have some kind of goal, so we can at least pretend that our wanderings are purposeful. We say that we’re looking for our friends’ brass band, which parades all around the Quarter for most of the day, or we’re trying to find the Saint Ann parade, whose creeping colorful meander began in the early morn and ends with a ritual at the riverside. Maybe we’re headed to Claiborne Avenue to catch some of the Zulu parade and the huge African-

American street party that goes on there all day, and look for the elusive Mardi Gras Indians. We may never achieve these goals, but the idea of a quest keeps us moving through all the distractions, knowing fully that the distractions are the true goal.

The streets are thronged with masked and costumed revelers. A large posse with a drum corp marches up the road and we jump onto parked cars to dance and holler as they pass. We turn a corner to run into five people carrying elaborate totem poles on their shoulders. I spend a while talking with two elderly retirees sitting on the sidewalk in folding chairs sipping homemade cocktails while half-naked partiers roll all over each other on the pavement at their feet. We keep following one street band after another, dancing with each one for a while before breaking off to continue the quest. At one point, we're trying to make our way through a crowd that keeps getting thicker when I end up "accidentally" climbing the ramp onto the stage of a televised drag show, where I take a bow as I'm booed and ejected by security. In Jackson Square, the Christians tell us we're going to hell.

The composition of our group keeps changing as we're joined by new people and we lose others. I might go into a bar to use the bathroom and when I emerge my friends are gone, carried off carelessly in an unknown direction. I wander, half-looking for them until I find some other friends and join a new pack.

As the revelry and intoxication come to a peak, I lose any sense of what I'm seeing, what I'm doing, and why. People are fornicating between parked cars. A masked person kisses me full on the mouth and runs off—do I know them? The garbage truck passes by and a man dressed like a whirling dervish hangs off the back, waving at the crowd. Eventually, we think we've found the Saint Ann parade and follow for several blocks before we realize that we're wrong—we've joined a procession of imposters. But just then we're saved because the brass band we've been looking for all day rolls by on the next block playing a Klezmer tune. We run jubilant and jump in front of the band, arm-in-arm kicking our legs, circle-dancing through the crowd. When we've exhausted ourselves, we take a break and relax in the grass by the river, marveling at the unusual heavy blanket of mist that shrouds the water. After a while we hear news that the sound system is parked a few blocks away, damaged but still making music. We rouse ourselves to go check it out.

Intoxication and revelry are the central forces made manifest on this day, and even though there are plenty of intoxicating substances to be consumed, the effects of these can only compound the primal intoxication of the carnival atmosphere itself. Reality is warped, transformed. High weirdness, giddiness, and artifice abound when we 'channel the eternal drunken universe.

Mardi Gras miraculously achieves total immanence and transcendence at the same time. Immanence in that we are the spectacle. We are what's going on. No focal point lies outside of the madness that we create for each other in the streets. Everybody brings something to the event, whether it's music, gifts to hand out, a great costume, or just a good attitude and a sense of adventure. You're a drop in the bucket, but every drop counts. Together we create and share in a magical space, right here on the ground, within and among us, a decentralized web of heightened experience that spans the city.

This creation is much more than that sum of its parts, which is why we can say that Mardi Gras is a transcendent as well as an immanent experience. The whole social field is elevated to ecstatic heights. The texture of normal life is superseded; its restrictions and expectations are overcome to enjoy a rapturous collective communion with divine chaos, beauty, and generosity.

As you might expect, communing with chaos has its dangers. Carnival embraces more than pure beauty, love, and light. You might make it through relatively unscathed, but afterwards, during Ash Wednesday recuperations, the stories start coming in. Our friend who we lost when we encountered that drag show, it turns out, had been enveloped by the crowd as the show started and was trapped for a whole hour while strangers groped his body against his will. Another friend was dancing on top of the taco truck when he fell off, onto his head. Another is in jail for urinating on some bushes. One member of our pack, who had disappeared, later found herself across town, without her glasses or her memory of how she got there.

Carnival can be a lot of fun, but it's also a dark space where anything can happen, good or bad. Ordinary life is dangerous enough, especially in a city like New Orleans, but when you leave even that modest predictability and relative safety behind to dive head-first into a topsy-turvy world where the usual inhibitions and social norms are on hold and rash impulse rules the day, you're liable to get tossed around and possibly damaged in the tumult. Part of any spiritual journey is the encounter with dark forces, whether in the world or in oneself, and Mardi Gras is no

exception. You may even embody those dark forces yourself. During some particularly wild streaks in the heat of Mardi Gras, I know I've been inconsiderate, reckless, or destructive. I've carelessly left friends behind. I've made life harder for people who unfortunately had to work that day. I can be accepting of the excesses and transgressions that come with the carnival territory, but I'm never proud of these incidents after the fact, when I look back with ambivalent wonder at what had come over me.

I've always considered it one of the dubious virtues of New Orleans carnival that it transcends without escaping the mundane everyday world. Unlike other festivals of communal creativity, carnival does not take place in some space apart from noxious civilization, where organizers and participants can project their dream-gathering onto an idealized canvas. No, carnival springs organically right from the life of the city, and is inseparable from it, for better or for worse. Sure, most people have the day off of work or school, and parades and street partying cut traffic to a minimum. But commerce pushes on full bore, with bars, vendors, and strip clubs making big money. The police also make it big, nabbing people for petty offenses and extracting fines and bail money. The big parades hurl tons of cheap plastic shaped in Chinese sweatshops to the insatiable crowds, and the people dump their garbage all over the street where crews of jail inmates are made to clean it up at the end of each day's partying.

All of these reviled elements of modern life are fully interwoven with what we love about carnival. Mardi Gras is impure, messy, complicated, complicit. But this, I believe, is part of what gives carnival its longevity and force. It's an extension, an expression, of the messy and impure life of New Orleans. It is wildly inclusive. You don't have to be a special kind of person or hold any certain values to be swept up in the anarchy. It's happening right in front of your house. In all the neighborhoods, all over the city and beyond, people are participating in some way. Carnival is truly grassroots. We don't leave the straight world behind to get into our zone of anarchic conviviality. We are immersed in, and must negotiate, the omnipresent forces of civilization.

When the tidal wave finally breaks and recedes back into the ocean from which it arose, depositing us on dry land once again, a profound disorientation inevitably follows. Carnival had gradually taken over our lives in the month past until it became the all-consuming focus of our energy and attention. So deep was the rupture that it often takes days, or longer, to come down, to remember what life was like, what you did with yourself and how you thought of yourself before it all started. You may go through the motions of returning to work, your projects, visiting with friends, but it feels unfamiliar, unnatural now in the afterglow of all the feelings and experiences you're still trying to digest.

Taxing as it is, this process also rejuvenates and heals. Everyone spoke of the healing "catharsis" of the first Mardi Gras after Hurricane Katrina. At Mardi Gras we come together to celebrate the miracle of life and death, not as passive spectators but as active participants in an extravagant ritual of festive generosity. Carnival reminds us that "reality" as we're taught to accept it can and must be tossed aside to let deeper, more human forces flow. More even than a reminder, it's a direct experience, a collective exercise in this tossing aside. In carnival, we abandon our customary roles and act as equals, encouraging and supporting each other's embrace of the extraordinary. We are glorified, exalted, and simultaneously humbled by partaking in a ritual much bigger and older than any of us. Carnival is not anybody's great idea—it comes on like a force of nature, showing us that another world is not just possible, but right here, ready to burst forth when called.

And it doesn't stop there, because carnival leaks and spills into the rest of life. We not only drink greedily from the fountain while it's gushing, but, like conservationists who want to reuse every drop of water as many times as possible before it goes down the drain, we feed the energy released at carnival back into our daily lives ad infinitum, so that its fruits can multiply to sustain us throughout the year. Carnival instructs and deepens our joy, our forgiveness, our camaraderie, our creativity, our generosity, our working-together, our sense of community, until it becomes foundational to all that we do. Carnival makes us believe we can win. It brings us closer to the source.

# fifth Estate

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